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BROWN LOWS





# BROWNLOWS

BY

MRS OLIPHANT

AUTHOR OF 'THE HEAVENLYS OF CARLINGFORD,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III.



WILLIAM BLACKWOOD AND SONS

EDINBURGH AND LONDON

MDCCCLXVIII

250. v. 6.

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ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN BLACKWOOD'S MAGAZINE

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# BROWNLOWS.



## CHAPTER XXXI.

### SUSPICION.

NEITHER the next day, however, nor the next again, was Mrs Preston able to move. The doctor had to be brought at last, and he enjoined perfect quiet and freedom from care. If she had anything on her mind, it was to be exorcised and put away, he ordered, speaking to Mrs Swayne and Pamela, who had not a notion what she had on her mind. As for the patient, she made her effort to rise every morning, and failed, and turned upon her watchers such looks of despair as bewildered them. Every morning Jack Brownlow would come to ask for her, which was the only moment of the day in which Pamela found a little comfort ; but her mother found it out instinctively, and grew so restless, and moaned so pitifully

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A

when her child left her, that even that sorrowful pleasure had to be given up. The young people did not know what to think. They persuaded themselves sometimes that it was only the effect of illness, and that a fancy so sudden and unexplainable would, when she was better, vanish as unreasonably as it came ; but then, what was it she had to do ? When she had lain for several days in this state of feebleness, always making vain efforts after strength, another change came over Mrs Preston. The wild look went out of her eyes. One morning she called Pamela to her with more than her usual energy. " I am going to be very quiet and still for a week," she said ; " if I am not better then, I will tell you what you must do, Pamela. You must send for the Rector and for Nancy Christian from old Mrs Fennell's in Masterton. This is Tuesday, and it is the 30th ; and I will try for a week. If I am not better next Tuesday, you must send for the Rector. Promise me to do exactly what I say."

" Yes, mamma," said Pamela ; " but oh ! what for ? —if you would only tell me what it is for ! You never kept anything secret from me."

Mrs Preston turned a wistful look upon her child. " I must not tell you," she said—" I cannot tell you. If I did you would not thank me. You will know it soon enough. Don't ask me any questions for a

week. I mean to try and get well to do it myself ; but if I don't get well, no more time must be lost. You must not cross me, Pamela. What do you think I should care if it was not for you ? ”

“ And perhaps if I knew I should not care,” cried the poor little girl, wringing her hands. She could not tell what it was ; but still it became as clear as daylight to her that it was something against Jack.

“ You would tell it to him,” Mrs Preston said, with a deep sigh. Perhaps Pamela did not hear her, for the words were spoken almost under her breath ; but the girl heard the sigh, and divined what it meant. It was bitter to her, poor child, and hard to think that she could not be true to both—that her mother was afraid of trusting her—and that Jack and Mrs Preston were ranged on different sides, with her love and faith, as a bone of contention, between them. Perhaps it was all the harder that she could not cry over it, or get any relief to her soul. Things by this time had become too serious for crying. The little soft creature grew without knowing into a serious woman. She had to give up such vain pleasures as that of tears over her trouble. No indulgence of the kind was possible to her. She sat by her mother's bedside all day long, and, with her mother's eye upon her, had to feign composure when she little possessed it. Mrs Preston was unreasonable for the

first time in her life as regarded Pamela. She forgot what was needful for the child's health, which was a thing she had never done in her life before. She could not bear her daughter out of her sight. If she went down-stairs for half-an-hour, to breathe the fresh air, her mother's eyes would follow her to the door with keen suspicion and fear. Pamela was glad to think that it must be her illness, and that only, which had this effect. Even Mrs Swayne was more considerate. She was ready to come as often as it was possible to watch by the sick-bed and let the poor little nurse free; but Mrs Preston was not willing to let her free. As it happened, however, Mrs Swayne was in the room when her lodger gave Pamela instructions about calling the Rector if she were not better in a week, and it startled the curious woman. She told it to her neighbour and tenant in the next house, and she told it to old Betty; and the thing by degrees grew so patent to the parish that at last it came to Mr Hardcastle's ears. Naturally it had changed in the telling. Whereas Mrs Preston had directed him to be sent for in a certain desperate case, and as a last resource, the Rector heard that Mrs Swayne's inmate was troubled in her mind, and was anxious to confide some secret to him. What the secret was was doubtful, or else it would not have been a secret; but all Dewsbury believed that

the woman was dying, and that she had done something very bad indeed, and desired the absolution of a priest before she could die in peace. When he heard this, it was equally natural that Mr Hardcastle should feel a little excited. Though he had never dreamt of setting up a confessional, the idea of a penitent with a real burden on her conscience was pleasant; and he thought it his duty to see after her without delay. He went with the wisdom of a serpent and the meekness of a dove, not professedly to receive a confession, but to call, as he said, on his suffering parishioner; and he looked very important and full of his mission when he went up-stairs. Mrs Swayne had gone astray after new lights of Dissent, and up to this moment the dwellers under her roof had received no particular notice from Mr Hardcastle, so that it was a little difficult to account for his solicitude now.

"I heard you were ill," said the Rector; "indeed I missed you from church. As you are a stranger, and suffering, I thought there might be something that we could do——"

"You are very kind," said Mrs Preston; and then she looked askance both at Mrs Swayne and Pamela, keenly searching in their eyes to see if they had sent for him. And as Pamela, who knew nothing about it, naturally looked the guiltiest, her mother's



heart was smitten with a sharp pang at the thought that she had been betrayed.

"Not kind at all," said Mr Hardcastle, with animation. "It is my duty. If you have anything to say to me now——"

Once more Mrs Preston cast a keen glance at her daughter. And she asked slowly, "What should I have to say?" looking not at the Rector, but suspiciously into Pamela's face.

"My dear friend, how can I tell?" said Mr Hardcastle. "I have seen a great deal of the world in my time, and come through a great deal. I know how suffering tries and tests the spirit. Don't be shy of speaking to me. If," the Rector added, drawing a little nearer her pillow, "you would like me to send your attendants away——"

"Am I dying?" said Mrs Preston, struggling up upon her bed, and looking so pale that Pamela ran to her, thinking it was so. "Am I so ill as that? — do they think I cannot last out the time I said?"

"Mamma, mamma, you are a great deal better—you know you are a great deal better. How can you say such dreadful things?" said Pamela, kneeling by the bedside.

"If I am not dying, why do you forestall my own time?" said Mrs Preston. "Why did you trouble

Mr Hardcastle? It was soon enough on the day I said."

"My dear friend," said the Rector, "I hope you don't think it is only when you are dying that you have need of good advice and the counsel of your clergyman. I wish it was more general to seek it always. What am I here for but to be at the service of my parishioners night and day? And every one who is in mental difficulty or distress has a double claim upon me. You may speak with perfect freedom—whatever is said to me is sacred."

"Then you knew I wanted to speak to you?" said Mrs Preston. "Thank you, you are very kind. I am not ungrateful. But you knew I wanted to ask your assistance? somebody sent for you, perhaps?"

"I cannot say I was sent for," said Mr Hardcastle, with a little confusion, "but I heard—you know, in a country place, the faintest wish you can express takes wings to itself, and becomes known everywhere. I understood—I heard—from various quarters—that I might be of use to you——"

All the answer Mrs Preston made to this was to turn round to the head of the bed where Pamela stood, half hidden, in the corner. "That you might have something to tell him a little sooner!" she said. Her voice, though it was very low, so low as to be inaudible to the visitor, was bitter and sharp with

pain, and she cast a glance full of reproach and anguish at her only child. She thought she had been betrayed. She thought that, for the lover's sake, who was dearer than father or mother, her own nursling had forfeited her trust. The bitterness of her look was such that Pamela, utterly innocent as she was, sank before it. She did not know what she had done. She did not understand what her mother meant; but she shrank back among the curtains as if she had been really guilty, and it brought to a climax her sense of utter confusion and dismay.

"I will tell you what the case is," Mrs Preston added quickly, the colour coming back to her cheek. "I am not in very good health, as you see, but I have something very important to do before I die. It concerns the comfort of my child. So far as I am involved, it would not matter—for I shall not live long," she added, with a certain plaintive tremor of self-pity in her voice. "It is all for Pamela, sir—though Pamela—— But lately I grew frightened, and thought myself worse; and I told them—I told *her*—that if I was no better next Tuesday, they were to send for you. I would not trouble you if I were well enough myself. It was in case I should not be able; and I thought of asking your help. I suppose it was their curiosity. Curiosity is not a sin; but—they say I am not worse—they say I am even a little

better. So I will not trouble you, Mr Hardcastle. By that time I shall be able for what I have to do."

"You must not be too sure of that," said the Rector; and he meant it kindly, though the words had but a doubtful sound; "and you must not think I am prying or intrusive. I was not sent for; but I understood—that—I might be of use. It is not giving me trouble. If there is anything I can do for you—if you have no friends——"

"We shall soon have plenty of friends," said Mrs Preston, quickly, with a certain mocking tone in her voice—"plenty of friends. We have not had many hitherto; but all that will soon change. Yes, I shall be able for what I have to do. I feel quite sure of it. You have done me a great deal of good. After it is done," she said, with that desolate look which Pamela felt to the bottom of her heart, but could not understand, "there will be time enough to be ill, and to die too, if God pleases. I will not mind it much when I leave her with many friends."

"Mamma!" cried Pamela, with a mingled appeal and reproach; but though she bent over the bed she could not catch her mother's eyes.

"It is true," said Mrs Preston. "I was like to break my heart when I thought how old I was, and


that I might die and leave you without anybody to care for you ; but now you will have many friends—plenty of friends. And it don't so much matter." She ended with such a sigh as moved even the heart of the Rector, and touched Mrs Swayne, who was not of a very sympathetic disposition, to tears.

"You must not talk of leaving your child without a protector," said Mr Hardcastle—"if you knew what it was to have a motherless girl to bring up, you would not speak of it lightly. That is my case. My poor little Fanny was left motherless when she was only ten. There is no misfortune like it to a girl. Nobody knows how to manage a young creature but a mother. I feel it every day of my life," said the Rector, with a sigh. It was very very different from Mrs Preston's sigh. There was neither depth in it nor despair, like that which breathed in hers. Still, its superficial sadness was pathetic to the women who listened. They believed in him in consequence, more perhaps than he believed in himself, and even Mrs Swayne was affected against her will.

"Miss Fanny has got them as is father and mother both in one," she said ; "but bless you, sir, she ain't always like this. It's sickness as does it. One as is more fond of her child, nor prouder of her child, nor more content to live and see her 'appy, don't

exist, when she's in her ordinary. And now, as the Rector has come hisself, and as comfort's at hand, you'll pluck up a spirit, that's what you'll do. Miss Pamela, who's as good as gold, don't think of nothing but a-nursing and a-looking after her poor dear mamma; and if so be as you'd make good use o' your time, and take the Rector's advice——"

Mrs Preston closed her lips tight, as if she was afraid that some words would come through against her will, and faced them all with an obstinate resolution, shaking her head as her only answer. She faced them half seated on her bed, rising from among her pillows as if they were all arrayed against her, and she alone to keep her own part. Her secret was hers, and she would confide it to nobody; and already, in the shock of this intrusion, it seemed to her as if the languid life had been stirred in her veins, and her forces were mustering to her heart to meet the emergency. When she had made this demonstration, she came down from those heights of determination and responded to the Rector's claim for sympathy as he knew well every woman would respond. "A girl is the better of her mother," she said, "even when she don't think it. Many a one is ungrateful, but we are not to look for gratitude. Yes, I know a mother is still something in this world. Pamela, you'll remember some day what



Mr Hardcastle said; and if Miss Fanny should ever want a friend—— But I am getting a little tired. Good-bye, Mr Hardcastle; perhaps you will come and see me again. And after a while, when I have done what I have to do——”

“Good-bye,” said the Rector, after waiting vainly for the close of the sentence; and he rose up and took his leave, feeling that he had been dismissed, and had no right to stay longer. “If you should still want assistance—though I hope you will be better, as you expect——”

Mrs Preston waved her hand in reply, and he went down-stairs much confused, not knowing what to make of it. The talk he had with Mrs Swayne in the passage threw but little light on the matter. Mrs Swayne explained that they were poor; that she thought there was “something between” Miss Pamela and Mr John; that she herself had essayed strenuously to keep the young people apart, knowing that nothing but harm would come of it; but that it was only lately, very lately, that Mrs Preston had seemed to be of her opinion. A week ago she had shut the door upon the young man, and fallen ill immediately after. “And all this talk o’ something to do has begun since that,” she added; “she’s never had nothing to do as long as she’s been here. There’s a bit of a pension as is paid regular, and

there never was no friends as I know of as could die and leave her money. It's some next-of-kin business, that's my idea, Mr Hardcastle—some o' that rubbish as is in the papers—folks of the name of Smith or suchlike as is advertised for, and something to come to their advantage. But she's awful close and locked up, as you may say, in her own bosom, and never said a rational word to me."

"You don't think it's *this*?" said Mr Hardcastle, putting his hand significantly to his forehead.

"Oh, bless you, it ain't that," said Mrs Swayne. "She's as clear as clear—a deal clearer, for the matter of that, than she was afore; the first time as she had the sense to turn Mr John from the door was the night as she was took. It ain't that. She's heard o' something, you take my word, and it's put fancies in her head; and as for that poor Pamela, she's as jealous of every look that poor child gives; and I don't call it no wonder myself, if you let a girl see a deal of a gentleman, that she should think more of him than's good for her. It should have been stopped when it began; but nobody will ever listen to me."


Mr Hardcastle left the house with altogether a new idea in his mind. He had lectured his neighbour about young Powys and Sara, but he had not known anything of this still more serious scandal about Jack. He murmured to himself over it as he



went away with a great internal *chuchotement*. Poor Mr Brownlow! both his son and his daughter thus showing low tastes. And he could not refrain from saying a few words about it to Jack, whom he met returning with his shooting party — words which moved the young man to profound indignation. He was very angry, and yet it was not in nature that he should remain unmoved by the suggestion that Pamela's mother was either mad or had something on her mind. He had himself seen enough to give it probability. And to call Mr Hardcastle a meddling parson, or even by some of those stronger and still less graceful epithets which sometimes follow the course of a clergyman's beneficent career, did but little good. Jack was furious that anybody should have dared to say such words, but the words themselves rankled in his heart. As soon as he could steal out after dinner he did so, and went to the gate and saw the glimmering light in Mrs Preston's window, and received Mrs Swayne's ungracious report. But Pamela was not to be seen. She was never to be seen. "They will kill her with this watching," he said to himself, as he stood and watched the light, and ground his teeth with indignation. But he could do nothing, although she was his own and pledged to him. He was very near cursing all mothers and fathers, as well as interfering priests and ungracious

women, as he lingered up the avenue going home, and sucked with indignation and disgust at his extinguished cigar.

Pamela was no better off up-stairs. She was doubted, suspected, feared—she who had been nothing but loved all her life. The child did not understand it, but she felt the bitterness of the cloud into which she had entered. It made her pale, and weighed upon her with a mysterious depth of distress which would not have been half so heavy had she been guilty. If she had been guilty she would have known exactly the magnitude of the offence, and how much she was suspected of; but being utterly innocent she did not know. Her sweet eyes turned deprecating, beseeching, to her mother's, but they won no answer. The thought that her child had conspired against her, that she had planned to entrap her secret from her and betray it to her lover, that she was a traitor to the first and tenderest of affections, and that the new love had engrossed and swallowed up everything—was the bitter thought that filled Mrs Preston's mind. When the girl arranged her pillows or gave her medicine, her mother thanked her with formality, and answered her sharply when she spoke. "Dear mamma, are you not tired?" the poor child would say; and Mrs Preston answered, "No, you need not think it, Pamela; people sometimes balk their own purpose.



I shall be able after all. Your Rector has done me good."

"He is not my Rector, mamma," said Pamela. "I never spoke to him before. Oh! if you would only tell me why you are so angry with me."

"I am not angry. I suppose it is human nature," said Mrs Preston, and this was all the answer she would give. So that Pamela, poor child, had nothing for it but to retire behind the curtains and cry. This time the tears would well forth. She had been used to so much love, and it was hard to do without it; and when her mother repulsed her, in her heart she cried out for Jack. She cried out for him in her heart, but he could not hear her, though at that very moment he was no further off than in the avenue, where he was lingering along very indignant and heavy-hearted, with his cigar out, though he did not know. It might not be a very deadly trouble to either of the young sufferers, but it was sharp enough in its way.

## CHAPTER XXXII.

### THE REAL TRAITOR.

WHILE these things were going on at the gate of Brownlows, a totally different scene was being enacted in Masterton. Mr Brownlow was at his office, occupied with his business and the people in his house, and the hundred affairs which make up a man's life. And as he had little time to brood over it, it had very much gone out of his mind how near he was to the crisis of his fate. An unexperienced sailor when he sees the port near is apt to be lulled into a dream of safety, though the warier seaman knows that it is the most dangerous moment. Mr Brownlow was not inexperienced, but yet he allowed himself to be deluded into this sense of security after all his terrors. Young Powys came to business every day, and was very steady and regular, and a little disconsolate, evidently having nothing in his mind which could alarm his employer. When Mr Brown-

low looked up and saw the young fellow going steadily and sadly about his business, it sometimes gave him a sense of compunction, but it no longer filled him with fear. He had come to think the youth was harmless, and with the base instinct of human nature no longer cared for him. At least he cared for him in a different way; he promised to himself to make it all up to him afterwards—to be his providence, and look after him and establish him in the world—to give him no reason to repent having intrusted his fortunes to his hands. This was how Mr Brownlow was thinking; and he had succeeded in making himself believe that it would be far the best for Powys. As for justice, it was rarely to be had under any circumstances. This young fellow had no more right to it than another; probably if mere justice had been dealt to him it would have been the ruin of him, as well as the ruin of other people. His *real* advantage after all was what Mr Brownlow studied. Such thoughts by dint of practice became easier and more natural. The lawyer actually began to feel and believe that for everybody concerned he was taking the best course; and the September days wore on, blazing, sultry, splendid, with crack of guns over the stubble, and sound of mirth indoors, where every room was full and every association cheerful. It would only have been making Powys uncomfortable

(Mr Brownlow reflected) to have invited him at that moment among so many people, even if the accident with Sara had not prevented it. By-and-by, when all was safe, Sara should go away in her turn to visit her friends, and Powys should be had out to Brownlows, and have the remains of the sport, and be received with paternal kindness. This was the plan Mr Brownlow had formed, and in the mean time he was cheerful and merry, and no way afraid of his fate.

Things were so when one morning he received a sudden message from old Mrs Fennell. He had not been to see her for a long time. He had preferred, as far as possible, to ignore her very existence. His own conduct appeared to him in a different light when he saw her. It was blacker, more heinous, altogether vile, when he caught the reflection of it as in a distorted mirror in the old woman's suggestions. And it made Mr Brownlow very uncomfortable. But this morning the summons was urgent. It was conveyed in a note from his mother-in-law herself. The billet was written on a scrap of paper, in a hand which had never been good, and was now shaky and irregular with old age. "I want to speak to you particular," Mrs Fennell wrote. "It's about Nancy and her goings-on. There's something astir that is against your advantage and the children.

Don't waste any time, but come to me ;" and across the envelope she had written *Immediate* in letters half an inch long. Mr Brownlow had a momentary thrill, and then he smiled to himself in the imbecility of self-delusion. "Some fancy she has taken into her head," he said. Last time she had sent for him her fears had come to nothing, and *his* fears, which were exaggerated, as he now thought, had worn out all his capabilities of feeling. He took it quite calmly now. When he had freed himself of his more pressing duties, he took his hat, and went leisurely across the market-place, to his mother-in-law's lodgings. The door was opened to him by Nancy, in whose looks he discovered nothing particular ; and it did not even strike him as singular that she followed him up-stairs, and went in after him to Mrs Fennell's sitting-room. The old lady herself was sitting in a great chair, with her foot upon a high footstool, and all her best clothes on, as for an occasion of solemnity. Her head was in continued palsied motion, and her whole figure trembling with excitement. She did not even wait until Mr Brownlow had taken the chair which Nancy offered him with unusual politeness. "Shut the door," she cried. "Nancy, don't you go near Mr Brownlow with your wiles, but shut the door and keep in your own place. Keep in your own place—

do ; and don't fuss about a gentleman as if that was to change his opinion, you old fool, at your age."

"I'm but doing my duty," said Nancy; "it's little change my wiles could make on a gentleman—never at no age as I know on—and never with Mr Brownlow——"

"Hold your peace," cried Mrs Fennell. "I know your tricks. You're old, and you should know better; but a woman never thinks as it's all over with her. John Brownlow, you look in that woman's face and listen to me. You've given her food and clothes and a roof over her head for years and years, and a wage that I never could see the reason for; and here she's been a-conspiring and a-treating with your enemies. I've found her out, though I am old and feeble. Ne'er a one of them can escape me. I tell you she's been conspiring with your enemies. I don't say that you've been over-kind to me; but I can't sit by and see my Bessie's children wronged; and I've brought you here to set you face to face, and hear what she's got to say."

Mr Brownlow listened to her without changing countenance; he held his breath hard, and when she ceased speaking he let it go with a long respiration, such as a man draws after a great shock. But that was the only sign of emotion he showed; partly because he was stunned by the unexpected blow;



partly because he felt that her every word betrayed him, and that nothing but utter self-command could do him any good.

"What does this mean?" he said, turning from Mrs Fennell to Nancy. "Who are my enemies? If you have anything to say against Nancy, or if Nancy has anything to say——"

"She's a traitor," cried Mrs Fennell, with a voice which rose almost to a scream. "She's a real traitor;—she eats your bread, and she's betrayed you. That's what I mean, and it's as clear as day."

All this time Nancy stood steadily, stolidly by, with her hand on the back of a chair, not defiant but watchful. She had no wish to lose her place, and her wages, and her comforts; but yet, if she were sent away, she had a claim upon the other side. She had made herself a friend like the unjust steward.

Therefore she was no way disturbed when Mr Brownlow turned round and looked her in the face. He too was very steady and self-possessed, yet she saw by the way that he turned round on his chair, by the grasp he took of the back of it, by the movement of his eyelids, that every word had told upon him. "You must speak a little more plainly," he said, with an attempt at a smile. "Perhaps you

will give me your own account of it, Nancy. Whom have you been conspiring with? Who are my enemies? I think I am tolerably at peace with all the world, and I don't know."

Nancy paused with a momentary hesitation, whether to speak the simple truth, and see the earthquake which would ensue, which was a suggestion made by the dramatic instinct within her—or whether to keep on the safe side and deny all knowledge of it. If she had been younger, probably she would have preferred the former for the sake of the excitement; but being old she chose the latter. She grew meek under Mr Brownlow's eyes, so meek that he felt it an outrage on his good sense—and answered softly as became a woman anxious to turn away wrath.

"Nor me, sir," said Nancy, "*I don't know*. If I heard of one as was your enemy, it would be reason enough to me for never looking nigh him. I've served you and yours for long, and it's my place to be faithful. I've been a-seeing of some old friends as lives a little bit out o' Masterton. I'm but a servant, Mr Brownlow, but I've some friends; and I never heard as you was one to think as poor folks had no hearts. It was a widow woman, as has seen better days; it ain't much I can do for her, but she's old, and she's poor, and I go to see her a bit times

and times. I hope there ain't nothing in *that* that displeases you. If I stayed longer than I ought last time——”

“What is all this to me?” said Mr Brownlow. “Who is your widow woman? Do you want anything for her? There are plenty of charities in Masterton if she belongs to the place. But it does not seem worth while to have brought me here for this.”

“You know better than that, John Brownlow,” said Mrs Fennell, in a kind of frenzy. “If it was any poor woman, what would I have cared? Let 'em starve, the hussies, as brings it all on themselves. There's but one woman as would trouble me, and you know who it is, John Brownlow; and that old witch there, she knows, and it's time to put a stop to it all. It's time to put a stop to it all, I say. She's a-carrying on with that woman; and my Bessie's children will be robbed before my very eyes; and I'm a poor old creature, and their own father as ought to take their part—— I tell you, it's that woman as she's a-carrying on with; and they'll be robbed and ruined, my pretty dears, my Bessie's children! and she'll have it all, that wretch! I'd kill her, I'd strangle her, I'd murder her, if it was me!”

Mrs Fennell's eyes were bloodshot, and rolled in

their sockets wildly—her head shook with palsied rage—her voice stammered and staggered—and she lifted her poor old lean hands with wild incoherent gestures. She was half-mad with passion and excitement. She, who was so terribly in earnest, so eager in her insane desire to save him, was in reality the traitor whom he had most to fear; and Mr Brownlow had his senses sufficiently about him to perceive this. He exerted himself to calm her down and soothe her. “I will see after it—I will see after it,” he said. “I will speak to Nancy—don’t excite yourself.” As for Mrs Fennell, not his persuasion, but her own passion, wore her out presently, and reduced her to comparative calm; after a while she sank into silence, and the half-doze, half-stupor of extreme age. When this reaction had come on, Mr Brownlow left the room, making a sign to Nancy to follow him, which the old woman did with gradually-rising excitement, feeling that now indeed her turn had come. But he did not take her apart, as she had hoped and supposed, to have a desperate passage of arms. He turned round on the stair, though the landlady stood below within hearing ready to open the door, and spoke to her calmly and coldly. “Has she been long like this?” he said, and looked Nancy so steadily in the face that, for the first time, she was discomfited, and lost all clue

to his meaning. She stood and stared at him for a minute, not knowing what to say.

"Has she been long like this?" Mr Brownlow repeated a little sharply. "I must see after a doctor at once. How long has it lasted? I suppose no one can tell but you?"

"It's lasted—but I don't know, sir," said Nancy—"I don't know; I couldn't say, as it was nothing the matter with her head. She thinks as there's a foundation. It's her notion as I've found out——"

"That will do," said Mr Brownlow; "I have no curiosity about your friends. It is your mistress's health I am thinking of. I will call on Dr Bayley as I go back; and you will see that she is kept quiet, and has every attention. I am grieved to see her in such an excited state. She must not be left alone. If your friends require your visits, let me know, and I will send a nurse. If it has been neglect that has brought this on, you may be sure it will tell on yourself afterwards," Mr Brownlow added, as he went out. All this was said in the presence of the mistress of the house, who heard and enjoyed it. And he went away without another look at her, without another word, without praying for her silence, or pleading with her for her secret, as she had expected. Nancy was confounded, notwithstanding all her knowledge. She stood and stared after him with a

sinking heart, wondering if there were circumstances she did not know, which held him harmless, and whether after all it had been wise of her to attach herself to the cause of his adversaries. She was disappointed with the effect she had produced, and of the passage of arms she had expected, and the keen cross-examination which she had been prepared to baffle. She looked so blank that the landlady, looking on, felt that she too could venture on a passing arrow."

"You'll take my word another time, Nancy," she said. "I told you as it was shameful neglect to go and leave her all by herself, and her so old and weakly, poor soul! You don't mind the likes of us, but you'll have to mind what your master says."

"He ain't no master of mine," said Nancy, fiercely, "nor you ain't my mistress, Lord be praised. You mind your own business, and I'll mind mine. It's fine to be John Brownlow, with all his grandeur; but pride goes before a fall, is what I says," the old woman muttered, as she went back to Mrs Fennell's room. She had said so at Brownlows, looking at the avenue which led to the great house, and at the cozy little lodge out of which she had already planned to turn old Betty. That vision rose before her at this trying moment, and comforted her a little. On the one side the comfortable lodge, and an easy

life, and the prospect of unbounded tyranny over a new possessor, who should owe everything to her ; but, on the other side, dismissal from her present post, which was not unprofitable, an end of her good wages and all her consolations. Nancy drew her breath hard at the contrast ; the risk seemed to her as great almost as the hope.

Mr Brownlow left the door composed and serious, as a man does who has just been in the presence of severe perhaps fatal illness, and he went to Dr Bayley, and told that gentleman that his mother-in-law's brain was, he feared, giving way, and begged him to see her immediately ; and then he went to the office, grave and silent, without a touch of apparent excitement. When he got there, he stopped in the outer office, and called Powys into his own room. "We have not seen you at Brownlows for a long time," he said. "Jack has some young fellows with him shooting. You had better take a week's holiday, and come up with me to-night. I shall make it all right with Wrinkell. You can go home and get your bag before the dogcart comes."

He said this quickly, without any pause for consideration, as if he had been giving instructions about some deed drawing out ; and it was some time before Powys realised the prospect of paradise thus opening before him. "I, sir—do you mean me?" he cried, in

his amazement. "To-night?" And Mr Brownlow appeared to his clerk as if he had been an angel from heaven.

"Yes," he said, with a smile, "to-night. I suppose you can do it? You do not want much preparation for pleasure at your age."

Then poor Powys suddenly turned very pale. Out of the first glow of delight he sank into despondency. "I don't know, sir—if you may have forgotten—what I once said to you—about—about—my folly," faltered the young man, not daring to look into his employer's face.

"About——?" said Mr Brownlow; and then he made as though he suddenly recollected, and laughed. "Oh, yes, I remember," he said. "I suppose all young men are fools sometimes in that respect. But I don't see it is any business of mine. You can settle it between you. Be ready for me at six o'clock."

And thus it was all arranged. Powys went out to get his things, not knowing whether he walked or flew, in such a sudden amaze of delight as few men ever experience; and when he was gone Mr Brownlow put down his ashy face into his clasped hands. Heaven! had it come to this? At the last moment, when the shore was so near, the tempest wellnigh spent, deliverance at hand, was there no resource but



this, no escape? All his precautions vain, his wiles, his struggle of conscience! His face was like that of a dead man as he sat by himself and realised what had happened. Why could not he fly to the end of earth, and escape the Nemesis? Was there nothing for it but, like that other wretched father, to sacrifice his spotless child?

## CHAPTER XXXIII.

### ONLY MR BROWNLOW'S CLERK.

THERE was a pleasant bustle about the house that evening when the dogcart drove up. The sportsmen had been late of getting in, and nobody as yet had gone to dress; the door was open, and in the hall and about the broad doorsteps pretty groups were lingering. Sara and her friends on their way upstairs had encountered the gentlemen, fresh from their sport, some of whom had no doubt strayed to the sideboard, which was visible through the open door of the dining-room; but the younger ones were about the hall in their shooting-dresses talking to the girls and giving an account of themselves. There was about them all that sense of being too late, and having no right to be there, which gives a zest to such stolen moments. The men were tired with their day's work, and, for that matter, the ladies too, who, after the monotony of the afternoon and

their cup of tea, wanted a little amusement; and there was a sound of talk and of laughter and pleasant voices, which could be heard half-way down the avenue. They had all been living under the same roof for some days at least, and people get to know each other intimately under such circumstances. This was the scene upon which young Powys, still bewildered with delight, alighted suddenly, feeling as if he had fallen from the clouds. He jumped down with a light heart into the bright reflection of the lamp which fell over the steps, but somehow his heart turned like a piece of lead within his breast the moment his foot touched the flags. It grew like a stone within him without any reason, and he did not know why. Nobody knew him, it is true; but he was not a shy boy to be distressed by that. He jumped down, and his position was changed. Between him and Mr Brownlow, who was so kind to him, and Jack, who was so hostile yet sympathetic, and Sara, whom he loved, there were unquestionable relations. But when he heard the momentary pause that marked his appearance, the quick resuming of the talk with a certain interrogative tone, "Who is he?" the glance at him askance,—a sudden conviction rushed into his mind that all the better-informed were saying, "It is only his clerk;" and it suddenly occurred to Powys that

there existed no link of possible connection between himself and all those people. He knew nobody—he had no right to know anybody among them. He was there only by Mr Brownlow's indiscreet favouritism, taken out of his own sphere. And thus he fell flat out of his foolish elysium. Mr Brownlow, too, felt it as he stepped out into the midst of them all; but his mind was preoccupied, and though it irritated, it did not move him. He looked round upon his guests, and he said, with a smile which was not of the most agreeable kind, "You will be late for dinner, young people, and I am as hungry as an ogre. I shan't give you any grace. Sara, don't you see Powys? Willis, send Mr Powys's things up to the green room beside mine. Come along and I'll show you the way."

To say Sara was not much startled would be untrue; but she too had been aware of the uncomfortable moment of surprise and dismay among the assembled guests, and a certain fine instinct of natural courtesy which she possessed came to her aid. She made a step forward, though her cheeks were scarlet, and her heart beating loud, and held out her hand to the new visitor: "I am very glad to see you," she said. Not because she was really glad, so much as because these were the first words that occurred to her. It was but a moment, and

then Powys followed Mr Brownlow up-stairs. But when Sara turned round to her friends again she was unquestionably agitated, and it appeared to her that everybody perceived she was so. "How cross your papa looks," said one of them; "is he angry?—what have we done?" And then the clock struck seven. "Oh what a shame to be so late! we ought all to have been ready. No wonder Mr Brownlow is cross," said another; and they all fluttered away like a flock of doves, flying up the staircase. Then the young men marched off too, and the pretty scene was suddenly obliterated, and nothing left but the bare walls, and Willis the butler gravely superintending his subordinates as they gave the finishing touches to the dinner-table. The greater part of the company forgot all about this little scene before five minutes had elapsed, but there were two or three who did not forget. These were Powys, first of all, who was tingling to the ends of his fingers with Sara's words and the momentary touch of her little hand. It was but natural, remembering how they parted, that he should find a special meaning in what she said, and he had no way of knowing that his arrival was totally unexpected, and that she was taken by surprise. And as for Sara herself, her heart fluttered strangely under the pretty white dress which was being put on. Madlle. Angelique could

not make out what it was that made her mistress so hard to manage. She would not keep still as a lady ought when she is getting dressed. She made such abrupt movements as to snatch her long bright locks out of Angelique's hands, and quite interfere with the management of her ribbons. She too had begun to recollect what were the last words Powys had addressed to her. And she to say she was glad to see him! Mr Brownlow had himself inducted his clerk into the green room, next door to his own, which was one of the best rooms in the house; and his thoughts would not bear talking of. They were inarticulate, though their name was legion; they seemed to buzz about him as he made his rapid toilette, so that he almost thought they must make themselves heard through the wall. Things had come to a desperate pass, and there was no time to be biassed by thoughts. He had dressed in a few minutes, and then he went to his daughter. Sara at the best of times was not so rapid. She was still in her dressing-gown at that moment with her hair in Angelique's hands, and it was too late to send the maid away.

"Sara," said Mr Brownlow, very tersely, "you will take care that young Powys is not neglected at dinner. Mind that you arrange it so——"

"Shall he take me in?" said Sara, with a sudden

little outbreak of indignation which did her good. "I suppose you do not mean that?"

"I am speaking in earnest," said Mr Brownlow, with some offence. "I have put him in the green room. Recollect that I think nothing in the house too good for this young man—nothing. I hope you will recollect what I say."

"Nothing?" said Sara, with a little surprise; and then the instinct of mischief returned to her, and she added, demurely, "That is going a long way."

"It is going a very long way—as far as a man can go," said Mr Brownlow, with a sigh—"further than most men would go." And then he went away. As for Sara, her very ears thrilled with the significance of his tone. It frightened her into her senses when perhaps she might have been excused for being partly out of them. If she was kind to Powys—as kind as her father's orders required—what could he think? Would he remember what he had ventured to say? Would he think she was giving him "encouragement"? Notwithstanding this perplexity, she allowed Angelique to dress her very nicely with her favourite blue ribbons and ornaments; and when she set out to go down-stairs, perhaps there was a little touch of Iphigenia in her air; but the martyrdom was not to call disagreeable. He was in the drawing-room when she went in. He was in a corner looking

at photographs, which is the general fate of a poor man in a large party who knows nobody. Sara had a little discussion with herself whether it was her duty to go at once to Powys and take him under her protection. But when she looked at him—as she managed to do, so to speak, without looking—it became apparent to her that the young Canadian was too much a man to be treated with any such condescension; he was very humble, very much aware that his presumption in lifting his eyes to the height on which she sat was unpardonable; but still, if she had gone to him and devoted herself to his amusement, there is no telling what the results might have been. He was not one to take it meekly. The room gradually filled and grew a pretty sight as Sara made these reflections. The ladies came down like butterflies, translated out of their warm close morning dresses into clouds of vapoury white and rosy colour and sparkles of ornament like evening dew; and the sportsmen in their knickerbockers had melted into spotless black figures, relieved with patches of spotless white, as is the use of gentlemen. The talk scarcely began again with its former freedom, for the moment before dinner is a grim moment, especially when men have been out all day and are hungry. Accordingly, the black figures massed themselves well up about the fireplace, and murmured through



their beards such scraps of intelligence as suit the masculine capacity; while the ladies settled all round like flower borders, more patient and more smiling. Nobody took any particular notice of Powys in his corner, except, indeed, Mr Brownlow, who stood very upright by the mantelpiece and did not speak, but looked at Sara, sternly as she thought, and then at the stranger. It was a difficult position for the young mistress of the house. When her father's glance became urgent she called a friend to her aid—a young woman of a serviceable age, not young and not old—who happened to be good-natured as well.

"He is a friend of papa's," said Sara—"a *great* friend, but he knows nobody." And, strengthened by this companionship, she ventured to draw near the man who, in that very room, not far from that very spot, had told her he loved her. He was looking at a picture—the same picture of the woman holding out bread to the beggar—and he was thinking, Should he ever have that bread?—was it possible? or only a mockery of imagination? As Sara approached him the memory of that other scene came over her so strongly, and her heart began to beat so loudly, that she could scarcely hear herself speaking. "I want to introduce you to my friend Miss Ellerslie," she said. "Mr Powys, Mary—you

will take her in to dinner." And then she came to a dead stop, breathless with confusion. As for poor Powys, he made his new acquaintance a bow, and very nearly turned his back upon her, not seeing her for the dazzle in his eyes.

This was about all the intercourse that passed between them, until, for one minute, and one only, after dinner, when he found himself by accident close to Sara's chair. He stood behind her lingering, scarcely seeing her, for she was almost hidden by the high back of the chair, yet feeling her all round him in the very air, and melted, poor fellow, into the languor of a sweet despair. It was despair, but yet it was sweet, for was he not there beside her? and though his love was impossible, as he said to himself, still there are impossibilities which are more dear than anything that can be compassed by man. As he stood, not venturing to say anything—not knowing, indeed, what to say—Sara suddenly turned round and discovered him. She looked up, and neither did she say anything; but when their eyes met, a sudden violent scorching blush flashed over her face. Was it anger, indignation, displeasure? He could not tell—but one thing was very clear, that it was recollection. She had not forgotten his wild words any more than he had. They were tingling in her ears as in his, and she did not look at

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him with the steady look of indignation putting him down. On the contrary, it was her eyes which sank before his, though she did not immediately turn away her face. That was all—and no rational human creature could have said it meant anything; but yet when it came to be Powys's fate to address himself once more to the photographs, he did so with the blood coursing through all his veins, and his life as it were quickened within him. The other people with whom she was intimate, who were free to crowd around her, to talk to her, to occupy her attention, were yet nothing to her in comparison with what he was. Between these two there was a consciousness that existed between no other two in the party, friendly and well-acquainted as they all were. The Canadian was in such a state of mind that this one point in the evening made everything else comparatively unimportant. His companion at dinner had been kind and had talked to him; but after dinner, when the ladies left, the men had snubbed the intruder. Those who were near him had rushed into talk about people and places of whom he had no knowledge, as ill-bred persons are apt to do—and he had not found it pleasant. They had made him feel that his position was an anomalous one, and the backwoodsman had longed in his heart to show his sense of their rudeness and get up and go away. But

after he had seen Sara's blush, he forgot all about the young fellows and their impertinence. He was at the time of life when such a thing can happen. He was for the moment quite content with the photographs, though he had not an idea what they were like. He was not hoping anything, nor planning anything, nor believing that anything could come of it. He was slightly delirious, and did not know what he was about—that was all.

"Are you fond of this sort of thing?" Mr Brownlow said, coming up. Mr Brownlow paid him an uneasy sort of attention, which made Powys more uncomfortable than the neglect of the others, for it implied that his host knew he was being neglected and wanted to make it up to him. "But you should have seen all these places before you can care for them. And you have never been abroad."

"No, except on the other side of the Atlantic," said Powys, with colonial pride; "and you don't seem to think anything of that."

"Ah, yes, Canada," said Mr Brownlow; and then he was so anxious to keep his young visitor in good-humour that he began to talk solidly and heavily of Canada and its resources and future prospects. Mr Brownlow was *distract*, and not very well informed, and Powys had not the heart to laugh at Sara's father even when he made mistakes, so that

the conversation was not very lively between them. This, however, was all the amusement the stranger got on his first evening at Brownlows. The proposal to go there had thrown him into a kind of ecstasy, but this was all the result. When he got into his own room at night and thought it all over, an impulse of good sense came to his aid. It was folly. In the office at Masterton he was in his fit place, and nobody could object to him; but this was not his fit place. It might be uncivil and bad manners on their part to make him feel it, but yet the party at Brownlows was right. He had nothing to do there. If he could think that Miss Brownlow's heart had softened a little towards him, it was his duty all the more to deny himself and take himself out of her way. What had love to do between her and him? It was monstrous—not to be thought of. He had been insane when he came, but to-morrow he would go back, and make a stern end of all those dreams. These were Powys's thoughts within himself. But there was a conversation going on about him down-stairs of a very different kind.


When the company had all retired, Jack detained his father and his sister to speak to them. Jack was highly uncomfortable in his mind himself, and naturally he was in a very rampant state of virtue.

He could not endure that other people should have their cakes and ale ; and he did not like his father's looks nor Sara's, and felt as if the honour of his house was menaced somehow. He took Sara's candle from her after his father had lighted it, and set it down on the table. "The nuisance of having all these people," said Jack, "is, that one never has a moment to one's self, and I want to speak to you. I don't mean to say anything against Powys, sir—nobody knows anything about him. Has he told you what he said to Sara when he was last here?"

"Jack! how dare you?" said Sara, turning on her brother; but Jack took no notice of her beautiful blazing eyes.

"Did he tell *you*, that you are so well informed?" said Mr Brownlow. If either of his children had been cool enough to observe it, they would have perceived that he was too quiet, and that his calm was unnatural; but they suspected nothing, and consequently they did not observe.

"He told me enough to make me understand," said Jack; "and I daresay you've forgotten how young men think, and don't suppose it's of any consequence. Sara knows—— If it was a mere nothing, I should not take the trouble," added the exemplary brother; "but, in the circumstances, it's



my duty to interfere. After what he said, when you bring him here again it is giving him licence to speak; it is giving him a kind of tacit consent. She knows," said Jack, pointing to his sister, who confronted him, growing pale and growing scarlet. "It's as good as saying you will back him out; and, good heavens, when you consider who he is——"

"Do *you* know who he is?" said Mr Brownlow. He was very hard put to it for that moment, and it actually occurred to him to deliver himself of his secret, and throw his burden on their shoulders—the two who, in their ignorance, were thus putting the last touch of exasperation to his ordeal. He realised the blank amazement with which they would turn to him, the indignation, the—— Ah, but he could not go any further. What would have succeeded to the first shock of the news he dared not anticipate—beggary probably, and utter surrender of everything; therefore Mr Brownlow held his peace.

"I know he is in the office at Masterton," said Jack—"I know he is your clerk, and I don't suppose he is a prince in disguise. If he is honest, and is who he professes to be—I beg your pardon, sir, for saying so—but he ought not to be brought into my sister's society, and he has no business to be here."

"Papa!" cried Sara, breathless, "order him to be quiet! Is it supposed that I can't see any one without being in danger of—of—that any man whom papa chooses to bring is to be kept away for me? I wonder what you think of me? We girls are not such wretched creatures, I can tell you; nor so easily led; nor so wicked and proud—nor—— Papa! stop this immediately, and let Jack mind his own affairs."

"I have just one word to say to Jack," said Mr Brownlow,—“my darling, be quiet—never mind;—Powys is more important to me than if he were a prince in disguise. I know who he is. I have told your sister that I think nothing in this house too good for him. He is my clerk, and you think he is not as good as you are; but he is very important to me. I give you this explanation, not because I think you have any right to it, after your own proceedings. And as for you, my dear child,” he added, putting his arm round her, with an involuntary melting of his heart, “my pretty Sara! you are only to do what your heart suggests, my darling. I once asked a sacrifice of you, but I have not the courage now. If your heart goes this way, it will be justice. Yes, justice. I know you don't understand me; but if not, Sara, I will not interfere with you. You are to do according to your own heart.”



"Papa!" said Sara, clinging to him, awed and melted and astonished by the emotion in his eyes.

"Yes," Mr Brownlow repeated, taking her face in his hands, and kissing it. If he had been a soft-hearted man he would have been weeping, but there was something in his look beyond tears. "It will be just, and the best way—but only if it's after your own heart. And I know you don't understand me. You'll never understand me, if all goes well; but all the same, remember what I say."

And then he took up the candle which Jack had taken out of Sara's hand. "Never understand me—never, if all goes well," he muttered to himself. He was strained to the last point, and he could not bear any more. Before his children had recovered from their amaze he had gone away, not so much as looking at them again. They might talk or speculate as they would; he could bear no more.

Jack and Sara looked in each other's faces as he disappeared. They were both startled, but in a different way. Was he mad? his son thought; and Jack grew pale over the possibility: but as for Sara, her life was bound up in it. It was not the blank of dismay and wonder that moved her. She did not speculate on what her father meant by justice. Something else was stirring too strongly in her heart.

"He must be going mad!" said Jack. "For

heaven's sake, Sara, don't give any weight to these delusions; he can't be in his right mind."

"Do you mean papa?" said Sara, stamping her foot in indignation; "he is a great deal wiser than we will ever be. Jack, I don't know what you mean; it must be because you are wicked yourself that you think everybody else is going wrong; but you shall not speak so to me."

"Yes; I see you are going to make a fool of yourself," said Jack, in his superiority. "You are shutting your eyes and taking your own way. When you come to a downfall you will remember what I say. You are trying to make a fool of him, but you won't succeed—mind I tell you, you won't succeed. He knows what he is about too well for that."

"If it is Mr Powys you are speaking of——" said Sara; but she paused, for the name betrayed her somehow—betrayed her even to herself, bringing the colour to her cheeks and a gleam to her eyes. Then she made believe as if she scorned to say more, and held her little head high with lofty contempt, and lighted her candle. "I am sure we should not agree on that subject, and it is better we should not try," said Sara, and followed her father loftily up-stairs, leaving Jack discomfited, with the feeling of a prophet to whom nobody would listen. He said to himself he knew how it would be—his father had got

some wild idea in his head ; and Sara was as headstrong and fanciful as ever girl was, and would rush to her own destruction. Jack went out with this sense of approaching calamity in his mind, and lighted his cigar, and took a turn down the avenue as far as the gate, where he could see the light in Mrs Preston's window. It seemed to him that the world was losing its balance,—that only he saw how badly things were turning, and nobody would listen to him. And, strangely enough, his father's conduct seemed so mad to him altogether that his mind did not fix on the maddest word of it—the word which by this time had got into Sara's head, and was driving her half wild with wonder. Justice ! What did it mean ? Jack, taking things in general as at their worst, passed over that particular. And thus they all separated and went to bed, as was to be supposed, in the most natural and seemly way. People slept well at Brownlows in general, the air being so good, and all the influences so healthful, after these long days out of doors ; and nobody was the wiser for it if “the family” were any way disturbed among themselves.

As for Mr Brownlow, he threw himself down on his bed in a certain lull of despair. He was dead tired. It was pitiful to see him thus worn out, with too little hope to make any exertion, driven to his last resource, thinking of nothing but of how to for-

get it all for a little and get it out of his mind. He tried to sleep and to be still, and when he found he could not sleep, got up again and took some brandy—a large fiery dose—to keep his thoughts away. He had thought so much that now he loathed thinking. If he could but go on and let fortune bring him what it might; if he could but fall asleep—asleep, and not wake again till all was over—not wake again at all for that matter. There was nothing so delightful in the world that he should wish very much to wake again. Not that the faintest idea of putting an end to himself ever crossed his mind. He was only sick of it all, tired to death, disgusted with everything—his own actions, and the frivolity and folly of others who interfered with his schemes, and the right that stood in his way, and the wrong that he was trying to do. At that moment he had not heart enough to go on with anything. Such moments of disgust come even to those who are the most energetic and ready. He seemed to have thrown the guidance of affairs out of his hands, and be trusting to mere blind chance—if anything is ruled by chance. If this boy and girl should meet, if they should say to each other certain foolish words, if they should be idiots enough, the one and the other, as to commit themselves, and pledge their lives to an act of the maddest absurdity, not unmixed with wickedness—for it would be wicked

of Powys, poor as he was, and burdened as he was, to ask Sara to marry him, and it would be insanity on her part to consent,—if this mad climax should arrive, then a kind of salvation in ruin, a kind of justice in wrong, would be wrought. And to this chance Mr Brownlow, after all his plans and schemes, after all his thought and the time he had spent in considering everything, had come as the sole solution of his difficulties. He had abdicated, as it were, the throne of reason, and left himself to chance and the decision of two ignorant children. What wind might veer their uncertain intentions, or sudden impulse change them, he could not tell. He could not influence them more, could not guide them any further. What could he do but sleep? Oh that he could have but slept, and let the crisis accomplish itself and all be over! Then he put out his light and threw himself upon his bed, and courted slumber like a lover. It was the only one thing in the world Mr Brownlow could now do, having transferred, as it were, the responsibility and the power of action into other hands.

## CHAPTER XXXIV.

### AN IMPOSTOR.

NEXT morning Powys was up early, with his wise resolution very strong in his mind. He seemed to see the folly of it all more clearly in the morning light. Such a thing might be possible in Canada ; but in this conventional artificial existence there were a hundred things more important than love or happiness. Even that, too, he felt was an artificial way of looking at it ; for, after all, let the laws of existence be ever so simple, a man who has already a family to support, and very little to do it on, is mad, and worse than mad, if he tries to drag a girl down into the gulf of poverty with him. And as for Sara having enough for both, Powys himself was not sufficiently unconventional and simple-minded to take up that idea. Accordingly he felt that the only thing to do was to go away ; he had been crazy to think of anything else, but now his sanity had

returned to him. He was one of the earliest of the party down stairs, and he did not feel himself so much out of place at the breakfast-table ; and when the young men went out, Jack, by way of keeping the dangerous visitor out of his sister's way, condescended to be civil, and invited him to join the shooting party. Powys declined the invitation. "I am going to the office with Mr Brownlow," he said, a decision which was much more satisfactory to Jack.

"Oh, I thought you had come for a few days," said Jack. "I beg your pardon ; not that the sport is much to offer any one—the birds are getting scarce ; but I thought you had come for some days."

"No, I am going back to-day," said Powys, not without a strangled inaudible sigh ; for the sight of the dogs and the guns went to his heart a little, notwithstanding his love and despair. And Jack's conscience pricked him that he did not put in a word of remonstrance. He knew well enough that Powys had not meant to go away, and he felt a certain compunction and even sympathy. But he reflected that, after all, it was far best for himself that every pretension should be checked in the bud. Powys stood on the steps looking after them as they went out ; and it cannot be denied that his feelings were dreary. It seemed hard to be obliged to deny

himself everything—not happiness alone, but even a little innocent amusement, such as reminded him of the freedom of his youth. He was too manly to grumble, but yet he felt it, and could not deny himself the pleasure of wondering how “these fellows” would like the prairies, and whether they would disperse in double-quick time if a bear or a pack of wolves came down upon them in place of their innocent partridges. No doubt “these fellows” would have stood the trial extremely well, and at another moment Powys would not have doubted that; but in the mean time a little sneer was a comfort to him. The dogcart came up as he waited, and Mr Brownlow made his appearance in his careful morning dress, perfectly calm, composed, and steady as usual,—a man whose very looks gave consolation to a client in trouble. But yet the lines of his face were a little haggard, if there had been anybody there with eyes to see. “What, Powys!” he said, “not gone with the others?” He said it with a smile, and yet it raised a commotion in his mind. If he had not gone with the others, Mr Brownlow naturally concluded it must be for Sara’s sake, and that the crisis was very near at hand.

“No, sir,” said Powys; “in fact I thought of going in with you to the office, if you will take me. It is the fittest place for me.”



Then it occurred to Mr Brownlow that the young man had spoken and had been rejected, and the thought thrilled him through and through, but still he tried to make light of it. "Nonsense," he said; "I did not bring you up last night to take you down this morning. You want a holiday. Don't set up for having an old head on young shoulders, but stay and enjoy yourself. I don't want you at the office to-day."

"If an old head means a wise one, I can't much boast of that," said Powys; and then he saw Sara standing in the doorway of the dining-room looking at him, and his heart melted within him. One more day! he would not say a word, not a word, however he might be tempted; and what harm could it do to any one? "I think I ought to go," he added, faintly; but the resolution had melted out of his words.

"Nonsense!" said Mr Brownlow, from the dogcart, and he waved his hand, and the mare set off at her usual pace down the avenue, waiting for no one. And Powys was left alone standing on the steps. The young men had gone who might have been in the way, and the ladies had already dispersed from the breakfast-table, some to the morning-room on the other side of the hall, some up-stairs for their hats and cloaks, before straying out on their morning perambulations. And Sara, who had her housekeep-

ing to do, save the mark ! was the only creature visible to whom he turned as her father drove away. Courtesy required (so she said to herself) that she should go forward into the hall a step or two, and say something good-natured to him. "If you are not of Jack's party," she said, "you must go and help to amuse the people who are staying at home; unless you want to write or do anything, Mr Powys. The library is on that side; shall I show you the way?"

And a minute after he found himself following her into the room, which was the first room he had ever been in at Brownlows. It was foolish of Sara,—it was a little like the way in which she had treated him before. Her own heart was beating more quickly than usual, and yet she was chiefly curious to know what he would do, what he would say. There was something of the eagerness of an experiment in her mind; although she had found it very serious after he left her the last time, and anything but amusing on the previous night.

"Thanks," said poor Powys, whose head was turning round and round; "I ought to have gone to the office. I am better there than here."

"That is not very complimentary to us," said Sara, with a little nervous laugh.

And then he turned and looked at her. She was

making a fool of him, as Jack would have said. She was torturing him, playing with him, making her half-cruel, half-rash experiment. "You should not say so," he said, with vehemence,—“you know better. You should not tempt me to behave like an idiot. You know I am ready enough to do it. If I were not an idiot I should never have come here again.”

“Not when my father brought you?” said Sara—“not when I—but I think you are rude, Mr Powys; I will leave you to write your letters, and when you have finished you will find us all up-stairs.”

With that she vanished, leaving the young man in such a confusion of mind as words would ill describe. He was angry, humiliated, vexed with himself, rapt into a kind of ecstasy. He did not know if he was most wretched or happy. Everything forbade him saying another word to her; and yet had not her father brought him, as she said? was not she herself surrounding him with subtle sweet temptation? He threw himself down in a chair and tried to think. When that would not do, he got up and began to pace about the room. Then he rushed suddenly to the door, not to fly away from the place, or to throw himself at Sara's feet, as might have been supposed. What he did was to make a wild dash at his travelling-bag, which had been packed and brought into the hall. It was still standing there, a monument of

his irresolution. He plunged at it, seized it, carried it into the library, and there unpacked it again with nervous vehemence. Any one who should have come in and seen his collars and handkerchiefs scattered about on the floor would have thought Powys mad. But at length, when he had got to the bottom of the receptacle, his object became apparent. From thence he produced a bundle of papers, yellow and worn, and tied up with a ribbon. When he had disinterred them, it was not without a blush, though there was nobody to see, that he packed up everything again in the capacious travelling-bag. He had gone into Mr Brownlow's library because Sara took him there, without a thought of anything to do, but suddenly here was his work ready for him. He sat down in Mr Brownlow's chair, and opened out the papers before him, and read and arranged and laid them out in order. When he had settled them according to his satisfaction, he made another pause to think, and then began to write. It was a letter which demanded thought; or at least it appeared so, for he wrote it hotly three times over, and tore it up each time; and on the fourth occasion, which was the last, wrote slowly, pausing over his sentences and biting his nails. The letter which cost all this trouble was not very long. Judging by the size of it, anybody might have written it in five minutes;

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but Powys felt his hand trembling and his brain throbbing with the exertion when he had done. Then he folded it up carefully and put it into an envelope, and addressed it to Mr Brownlow, leaving it with the bundle of papers on his employer's writing-table. When he had accomplished this he sat for some time irresolute, contemplating his packet on the table, and pondering what should follow. He had put it to the touch to win or lose, but in the mean time what was he to do?

She had said he would find them up-stairs. She had implied that he would be expected there; and to spend the day beside her would have been a kind of heaven to him; but that was a paradise which he had himself forfeited. He could not be in her company now as any other man might. He had said too much, had committed himself too deeply. He had betrayed the secret which another man more reticent might have kept, undisclosed in words, and it was impossible for him to be with her as another might. Even she, though she had never said a word to him that could be construed into encouragement, except those half-dozen words at the library door, was different towards him and other men. She was conscious too; she remembered what he had said. He and she could not be together without remembering it, without carrying on, articulately or inarti-

culately, that broken interview. Powys did the only thing that remained to him to do. He did not bound forth in the track of the dogcart, and follow it to Masterton, though that would not have been difficult to him; but he went out into the park, and roamed all about the house in widening circles, hearing sometimes the crack of the guns in the distance, sometimes in alleys close at hand the sound of voices, sometimes catching, as he thought, the very rustle of Sara's dress. He avoided them with much care and pains, and yet he would have been glad to meet them; glad to come upon the shooting party, though he kept far from the spot where he had heard they were to meet some of the ladies and lunch. It was not for him to seek a place among them. Thus he wandered about, not feeling forlorn or disconsolate, as a man might be supposed to do under such circumstances, but, on the contrary, excited and hopeful. He had set forth what he felt was his best claim to consideration before her father. If Mr Brownlow had not treated him with such inconceivable favour and indulgence, he never would have ventured upon this. But he had been favoured,—he had been encouraged. Grace had been shown to him enough to turn any young man's head, and he knew no reason for it. And at last he had ventured to lay before Mr Brownlow those distant problematical

claims to gentility which were all the inheritance he had, and to tell him what was in his mind. He was not a victim kept out of Paradise. He was a pilgrim of hope, keeping the gates in sight, and feeling, permitting himself to feel, as if they might open any moment and he might be called in.

While this was going on, it happened to him, as it happens so often, to come direct in the way of the very meeting which he had so carefully avoided. Turning round the corner of a great old yew, hanging rich with scarlet berries, he came all of a sudden, and without any warning, upon Sara herself, walking quickly from the village with a little basket in her hand. If it was difficult to talk to her with a body-guard of ladies in the shelter of her father's house, it may be supposed what it was to meet her in the silence, without another soul in sight, her face flaming with sudden recognition and confusion. Powys stood still, and for a moment speculated whether he should not fly; but it was only that moment of consideration that fled, and he found himself turning by her side, and taking her basket from her hand. She was no more mistress of the situation than he was: she was taken by surprise. The calm with which she had led the way into the library that morning, secure in her office of mistress of the house, had vanished away. She began hur-

riedly, eagerly, to tell him where she had been, and how it happened that she was returning alone. "The rest went off to the Rectory," she said. "Have you seen it? I think it is such a pretty house. They went to see Fanny Hardcastle. You have met her—I know you have, or I would not have mentioned her," said Sara, with a breathless desire to hear her own voice, which was unlike her. The sound of it gave her a little courage, and perhaps if she spoke a little loud and fast, it might attract some stray member of the party who might be wandering near. But no one came; and there were the two together, alone, in the position of all others most difficult in the circumstances—the green, silent park around them, not an eye to see nor an ear to hear; the red October sunshine slanting across their young figures, catching the ripple in Sara's hair as it had done that day, never to be forgotten, on which he first saw her. This was how fate or fortune, or some good angel or some wicked fairy, defeated Powys's prudent intention of keeping out of harm's way.

"But I wonder you did not go with Jack," Sara resumed. "I should, if I had been you. Not that I should care to kill the poor birds—but it seems to come natural at this time of the year. Did you have much sport in Canada? or do you think it stupid when people talk to you of Canada? Everybody



does, I know, as soon as they hear you have been there."

"You never could say anything that was stupid," said Powys, and then he paused, for he did not mean to get upon dangerous ground—honestly, he did not mean it, if circumstances had not been too strong for him. "Canada is a kind of common ground," he said. "It is a good thing to begin conversation on. It is not easy to exhaust it; but people are sadly ignorant," he added, with lively colonial feeling. He was scornful, in short, of the ignorance he met with. Even Mr Brownlow talked, he could not but recollect, like a charity-school boy on this subject, and he took refuge in his nationality as a kind of safeguard.

"Yes, I know I am very ignorant," said Sara, with humility. "Tell me about Canada. I should like to learn."

These words shook Powys sadly. It did not occur to him that she was as glad as he was to plunge into a foreign subject. There sounded something soft and confiding in the tone, and his heart gave a leap, as it were, towards her. "And I should like to teach you," he said, a little too warmly, and then stopped short, and then began hastily again. "Miss Brownlow, I think I will carry your basket home and leave you by yourself. I cannot be near without remembering things, and saying things. Don't

despise me—I could not bear to think you despised me.” He said this with growing agitation, but he did not quicken his steps or make any attempt to leave her; he only looked at her piteously, clasping the slender handle of her little basket in both his hands.

“Why should I despise you, Mr Powys? I don’t like Americans,” said Sara, demurely; “but you are not American—you are English, like all the rest of us. Tell me about Niagara and the Indians, and the backwoods and the skating and the snow. You see I am not quite so ignorant. And then your little sisters and your mother, do they like being at home? Tell me their names and how old they are,” said Sara, herself becoming a little tremulous. “I am fond of little girls.”

And then there ensued a breathless tremendous pause. He would have fled if he could, but there was no possibility of flight; and in a moment there flashed before him all the evidences of Mr Brownlow’s favour. Would he refuse him this supreme gift and blessing? Why had he brought him here if he would refuse him? Thus Powys broke down again, and finally. He poured out his heart, giving up all attempt at self-control when the tide had set in. He told her how he had been keeping out of the way of temptation. He described to her how he had been trying to command himself. He told her the

ground she trod on was fairy land ; the air she breathed musical and celestial ; the place she lived in, paradise ; that he hoped nothing, asked for nothing, but only to be allowed to tell her that she was—not an angel—for he was too much in earnest to think of hackneyed expressions—but the only creature in the world for whom he had either eyes or thoughts. All this poured upon Sara as she walked along softly with downcast eyes along the grassy path. It poured upon her, a perfect flood of adulation, sweet flattery, folly, and delirium—insane, and yet quite true. And she listened and had not a word to say. Indeed he did not ask for a word ; he made her no petition ; he emptied out his heart before her like a libation poured to the gods ; and then suddenly became silent, tremulous, and hoarse, as his passion worked itself out.

It was all so sudden, and the passion was so real, that they were both rapt by it, and went on in the silence after he had ceased, without knowing, until the impetus and rush of the outburst had in a measure worn out. Then Sara woke up. She had been quite quiet, pale, half frightened, wholly entranced. When she woke up she grew scarlet with sudden blushes ; and they both raised their eyes at the same moment and found that, unawares, they had come in sight of the house. Powys fell back at the sight with a pang

of dismay and consternation ; but it gave Sara courage. They were no longer entirely alone, and she regained her self-command.

“Mr Powys,” she said, tremulously, “I don’t know what to say to you. I am not so good as that. I—I don’t know what to say. You have not asked me anything. I—I have no answer to give.”

“It is because I want to ask everything,” said poor Powys ; “but I know—I know you can have nothing to say.”

“Not now,” said Sara, under her breath ; and then she held out her hand suddenly, perhaps only for her basket. There was nobody at the windows, heaven be praised, as she afterwards said to herself, but not until she had rushed up to her own room, and pulled off that glove, and looked at it with scarlet cheeks, and put it stealthily away. No, thank heaven ! even Angelique was at the other side, at a window which looked out upon the innocent shrubberies. Only the placid, silent house, blank and vacant, had been the witness. Was it a seal of anything, a pledge of anything, or only a vague touch, for which she was not responsible, that had fallen upon Sara’s glove ?

Mr Brownlow had gone away, his heart positively aching with expectation and anxiety. He did not know what might happen while he was gone. It might be more than life or death to him, as much

more as honour or dishonour go beyond mere life and death ; and yet he could not stay and watch. He had to nerve himself to that last heroism of letting everything take its chance, and going on with his work whatever happened. He went to the office with his mind racked by this anxiety, and got through his work all the same, nobody being the wiser. As he returned, a little incident for the moment diverted him from his own thoughts. This was the sight of the carrier's cart standing at Mr Swayne's door, and Mrs Swayne's lodger in the act of mounting into it with the assistance of a chair. Mr Brownlow, as he passed in the dogcart, could not but notice this. He could not but observe how pale and ill she looked. He was interested in them partly with that displeased and repellant interest excited by Jack's "entanglement," partly because of Pamela's face, which reminded him of something, and partly—he could not tell why. Mrs Preston stumbled a little as she mounted up, and Mr Brownlow, who was waiting for old Betty to open the gate, sprang down from the dogcart, being still almost as active as ever, and went across the road to assist. He took off his hat to her with the courtesy which all his family possessed, and asked if she was going away. "You do not look well enough to be setting out on a journey," he said, a little moved by the sight of the


pale old woman mounting into that uneasy conveyance. "I hope you are not going alone." This he said, although he could see she was going alone, and that poor little Pamela's eyes were big with complaint and reproach and trouble. Somehow he felt as if he should like to take the little creature home with him, and pet and cherish her, though, of course, as the cause of Jack's entanglement, nothing should have made him notice her at all.

But Mrs Preston looked at him fiercely with her kindled eyes, and rejected his aid. "Thank you," she said, abruptly; "I don't want any help—thank you. I am quite able to travel, and I prefer to be alone."

"In that case, there is nothing further to say," said Mr Brownlow, politely; and then his heart melted because of little Pamela, and he added, almost in spite of himself, "I hope you are not going away."

"Only to come back," said Mrs Preston, significantly—"only to come back; and, Mr Brownlow, I am glad to have a chance of telling you that then we shall meet again."

"It will give me much pleasure, I am sure," he said, taking off his hat; but he stared, as Pamela perceived. Meet again! what had he to do with the woman? He was surprised, and yet he could have laughed. As if he should care for meeting her!



And then he went away, followed by her fierce look, and walked up the avenue, dismissing the dogcart. The act might make him a little late for dinner, but on the whole he was glad to be late. At least there could be no confidences made to him before he had been refreshed with food and wine, and he wanted all the strength that could be procured in that or in any other way. Thus it was that he had not time to go into the library before dinner, but went up-stairs at once and dressed, and then into the drawing-room, looking at Sara and at his young guest with an eye whose keenness baffled itself. There was something new in their faces, but he could not tell what it was; he saw a certain gleam of something that had passed, but it was not distinct enough to explain itself, not having been, as will be perceived, distinct at all, at least on the more important side. He kept looking at them, but their faces conveyed no real information, and he could not take his child aside and ask her what it was, as her mother might have done. It was only after dinner that he went into the library. The suspense had to be borne whether he liked it or not, and he was not a man to make any grievance about it. The smile which he had been wearing in deference to the usages of society faded from his face when he entered that sheltering place. His countenance fell into haggard lines. A superficial spectator

would have supposed that now he was alone his distresses had come back to him ; but on the contrary his worn and weary look was not an evidence of increased pain—it was a sign of ease and rest. There he did not need to conceal the anxiety which was racking him. In this state of mind, letting himself go, as it were, taking off the restraints which had been binding him, he went into the library, and found Powys's letter, and the bundle of papers that were put up with it, placed carefully on his table before his chair.

The sight gave him a shock which, being all alone and at his ease, he did not attempt to conceal. The light seemed to go out of his eyes, his lip drooped a little, a horrible gleam of suffering went over his face : now no doubt the moment had come. He even hesitated and went away to the other extremity of the room, and turned his back upon the evidence which was to seal his fate. Then it occurred to him how simple-minded the young fellow was—to thrust his evidences thus, as it were, into the hands of the man whose interest it was to destroy them !—and a certain softening came over him, a thrill of kindness, almost of positive affection for the youth who was going to ruin him. Poor fellow !—he would be sorry—and then Sara would still have it, and he would be good to her. Mr



Brownlow's mind was in this incoherent state when he came back to the table, and, steeling himself for the effort, sat down before the fated papers. He undid the ribbon with trembling hands. Powys's letter was written on his own paper, with "Brownlows" on it in fantastic Gothic letters, according to Sara's will and pleasure; and a thrill of anger shot over him as he perceived this. Strange that as he approached the very climax of his fate, he should be able to be moved by such troubles! Then Mr Brownlow opened the letter. It was very short, as has been said, and this was the communication which had cost the young man so much toil:—

"DEAR SIR,—It seems strange to write to you thus calmly, at your own table, on your own paper ["Ah! then he felt that!" Mr Brownlow said to himself], and to say what I am going to say. You have brought me here notwithstanding what I told you, but the time is past when I could come and go like any common acquaintance. I wanted to leave to-day to save my honesty while I could, but you would not let me. I cannot be under the same roof with Miss Brownlow, and see her daily, and behave like a stock or stone. I have no right to address her, but she *knows*, and I cannot help myself. I want to lay before you the only claim I have to be

looked upon as anything more than your clerk. It was my hope to work into a higher position by my own exertions, and then to find it out. But in case it should count for anything with you, I put it before you now. It could not make me her equal; but if by any wonderful chance *that* should seem possible in your eyes, which to mine seems but the wildest yet dearest dream, I want you to know that perhaps if it could be traced out we are a little less lowly than we seem.

"I enclose my father's papers, which we have always kept with great care. He took care of them himself, and told me before he died that I ought to find my fortune in them. I never had much hope of that, but I send them to you, for they are all I have. I do not ask you to accept of me, to give me your daughter. I know it looks like insanity. I feel it is insane. But you have been either very very kind or very cruel to me. You have brought me here—you have made it life or death to me. She has everything that heart of man can desire. I have—what poor hope there may be in these papers. For God's sake look at them, and look at me, and tell me if I am mad to hope. Tell me to go or stay, and I will obey you—but let it be clear and definitive, for pity's sake.

"C. I. POWRS."

Mr Brownlow was touched by the letter. He was touched by its earnestness, and he was also touched by its simplicity. He was in so strange a mood that it brought even the moisture to his eye. "To have everything I possess in the world in his power, and yet to write like this," he said to himself, and drew a long sigh, which was as much relief as apprehension. "She will still have it all, and he deserves to have her," Mr Brownlow thought to himself; and opened up the yellow papers with a strange mixture of satisfaction and pain.

He was a long time over them. They were letters chiefly, and they took a great many things for granted of which Mr Brownlow was completely ignorant, and referred to many events altogether unknown to him. He was first puzzled, then almost disappointed, then angry. It seemed like trifling with him. These could not be the papers Powys meant to enclose. There were letters from some distressed mother to a son who had made a foolish marriage, and there were letters from the son, pleading that love might still be left to him, if not anything else, and that no evil impression might be formed of his Mary. Who was his Mary? Who was the writer? What had he to do with Brownlows and Sara and Phœbe Thomson's fortune? For a long time Mr Brownlow toiled on, hoping to come

to something, which bore upon his own case. The foregone conclusion was so strong in his mind, that he grew angry as he proceeded, and found his search in vain. Powys was trifling with him, putting him off—thrusting this utterly unimportant correspondence into his hands, instead of confiding, as he had thought, his true proofs to him. This distrust, as Mr Brownlow imagined it, irritated him in the most curious way. Ask his advice, and not intrust him with the true documents that proved the case! Play with his good sense, and doubt his integrity! It wounded him with a certain keen professional sting. He had worked himself up to the point of defrauding the just heir; but to suspect that the papers would not be safe in his hands was a suggestion that cut him to the heart. He was very angry, and he had so far forgotten the progress of time that, when he rang sharply to summon some one, the bell rang through all the hushed echoes of the house, and a servant—half asleep, and considerably frightened—came gaping, after a long interval, to the library door.

“Where is Mr Powys?” said Mr Brownlow. “If he is in the drawing-room give him my compliments, and ask him to be so good as to step down here for a few minutes to me.”

“Mr Powys, sir?” said the man—“the gentleman

as came yesterday, sir? The drawing-room is all shut up, sir, long ago. The ladies is gone to bed, but some of the gentlemen is in the smoking-room, and I can see if he's there."

"Gone to bed!" said Mr Brownlow; "why were they in such a hurry?" and then he looked at his watch and found, to his great surprise, that it was long past midnight. A vague wonder struck him once again whether his mind could be getting impaired. The suggestion was like a passing stab in the dark dealt him by an unseen enemy. He kept staring at the astonished servant, and then he continued sharply, "Go and see if he is in the smoking-room, or if not, in his own room. Ask him to come to me."

Powys had gone up-stairs late, and was sitting thinking, unable to rest. He had been near her the whole evening, and though they had not exchanged many words, there had been a certain sense between them that they were not as the others were. Once or twice their eyes had met, and fallen beneath each other's glance. It was nothing, and yet it was sweeter than anything certain and definite. And now he sat and thought. The night had crept on, and had become chilly and ghostly, and his mind was in a state of strange excitement. What was to come of it all? What could come of it? When

the servant came to his door at that late hour, the young man started with a thrill of apprehension, and followed him down-stairs almost trembling, feeling his heart sink within him; for so late and so peremptory a summons seemed an omen of evil. Mr Brownlow had collected himself before Powys came into the room, and received him with an apology. "I am sorry to disturb you so late. I was not aware it was so late; but I want to understand this——" he said; and then he waited till the servant had left the room, and pointed to a chair on the other side of the table. "Sit down," he said, "and tell me what this means."

"What it means?" said Powys, taken by surprise.

"Yes, sir, what it means," said Mr Brownlow, hoarsely. "I may guess what your case is; but you must know that these are not the papers to support it. Who is the writer of these letters? who is the Mary he talks of? and what has it all to do with you?"

"It has everything to do with me," said Powys. "The letters were written by my father—the Mary he speaks of is my mother——"

"Your mother?" said Mr Brownlow, with a sharp exclamation, which sounded like an oath to the young man's astonished ears; and then he

thrust the papers away with trembling hands, and folded his arms on the table, and looked intently into Powys's face. "What was your mother's name?"

"My mother's name was Mary Christian," said Powys, wondering; "but the point is—— Good heavens! what is the matter? what do you mean?"

His surprise was reasonable enough. Mr Brownlow had sprung to his feet; he had dashed his two clenched hands through the air, and said, "Impostor!" through his teeth. That was the word—there could be no mistake about it—"Impostor!" upon which Powys too jumped up, and faced him with an expression wavering between resentment and surprise, repeating more loudly in his consternation, "What do you mean?"

But the young man could only stand and look on with increasing wonder when he saw Mr Brownlow sink into his chair, and bury his face in his hands, and tremble like a palsied old man. Something like a sob even came from his breast. The relief was so amazing, so unlooked-for, that at the first touch it was pain. But Powys, standing by, knew nothing of all this. He stood, not knowing whether to be offended, hesitating, looking for some explanation; and no doubt the time seemed longer to him than

it really was. When Mr Brownlow raised his head his face was perfectly colourless, like the face of a man who had passed through some dreadful experiment. He waved his hand to his young companion, and it was a minute before he could speak.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "It is all a mistake—an entire mistake, on my part. I did not know what I was saying. It was a sudden pain. But never mind, I'm better——. What did you mean me to learn from these papers?" he added, after a pause, with a forced smile.

Then Powys knew his fate. It was a change which could not be described. In an instant, tone, look, manner, everything was altered. It was his master who said these last words to him; his employer, very kind and just, but unapproachable as a king. One moment before, and Mr Brownlow had been in his power, he did not know how or why; and in an instant, still without his knowing wherefore, his power had totally departed. Powys saw this in all the darkness of utter ignorance. His consternation was profound and his confusion. In a moment his own presumption, his own hopelessness, the misery of loss and disappointment, overwhelmed him, and yet not a word bearing upon the real matter at issue had been said.

"They are my father's papers," said poor Powys.



"I thought—that is, I supposed—I hoped there might be some indication in them—— I am sorry if I have troubled you unnecessarily. He belonged to a good family, and I imagined I might perhaps have reclaimed—— but it doesn't matter. If that is what you think——"


"Oh yes, I see," said Mr Brownlow; "you can leave them, and perhaps another time—— But as it is, if you feel inclined, my groom can drive you down to-morrow morning. I am not sure that I shall be going myself; and I will not detain you any longer to-night."

"Very well, sir," said Powys. He stood for a moment looking for something more—for some possible softening; but no word of kindness came except an abrupt good-night. Good-night—yes, good-night to everything—hope, love, happiness, fortune. Farewell to them all; and Sara, she who had almost seemed to belong to him. It seemed to Powys as if he was walking on his own heart as he left the room, trampling on it, stamping it down, crying Fool, fool! Poor fellow, no doubt he had been a fool; but it was a hard awakening, and the fault, after all, was not his own.

Mr Brownlow, however, was too much occupied with his own deliverance to think of Powys. He said that new name over to himself again and again,

to realise what had happened. Mary Christian—Mary Christian—surely he had heard it before ; but so long as it was not Phœbe Thomson what did it matter who was his mother ? Not Phœbe Thomson. She was dead perhaps—dead, and in a day or two more it would not matter. Two days, that was all—for it was now October. She might turn up a week hence if she would ; but now he was free—quite free ; without any wrong-doing or harm to anybody ; Brownlows and everything else his own. Could it be true ? Mary Christian, that was the name. And she came from the Isle of Man. But there was plenty of time to inquire into all that. The thing in the mean time was that he was released. When he got up and roused himself he found he could scarcely stand. He had been steady enough during all the time of his trial ; but the sudden relief took all his forces from him. He shook from head to foot, and had to hold by the tables and chairs as he went out. And he left the lamp burning in forlorn dreariness on the library table. The exertion of walking up-stairs was almost too much for him. He had no attention to give to the common things surrounding him. All his powers, all his senses were absorbed in the one sensation of being free. Only once as he went up-stairs did his ordinary faculties return to him, as it were, for a moment.

It was when he was passing the great window in the staircase, and glancing out saw the white moonlight glimmering over all the park, and felt the cold of the night. Then it occurred to him to wonder if the pale old woman whom he had seen getting into the carrier's cart could be travelling through this cold night. Poor old soul! He could not but think for the moment how chilly and frozen it would be. And then he bethought himself that he was safe, might go where he liked, do what he liked, had nobody menacing him, no enemy looking on to watch an opportunity—and no harm done! Thus Mr Brownlow paused in the weakness of deliverance, and his heart melted within him. He made not vows to the saints, of new churches or big tapers, but secret, tender resolutions in his heart. For this awful danger escaped, how should he show his gratitude to God? He was himself delivered, and goodness seemed to come back to him, his natural impulse. He had been saved from doing wrong, and without doing wrong all he wanted had been secured to him. What reason had not he to be good to everybody; to praise God by serving his neighbour? This was the offering of thanksgiving he proposed to render. He did not at the moment think of young Powys sitting at his window looking out on the same moonlight, very dumb and motionless and heartstricken, thinking life hence-



forward a dreary desert. No harm was done, and Mr Brownlow was glad. But it did not occur to him to offer any healing in Powys's case. If there was to be a victim at all, it was best that he should be the victim. Had he not brought it on himself?

## CHAPTER XXXV.

### AN UNLOOKED-FOR VISITOR.

POWYS was proud, and his pride was up in arms. He slept little that night, and while he sat and brooded over it all, the hopelessness and folly of his hope struck him with tenfold distinctness. Early next morning, before any one was up, he came down the great silent staircase, and left the house in the morning sunshine. The distance to Masterton was nothing to him. It was the second time he had left the house with despair in his heart. It would be the last time, he said to himself as he paused to look up at the closed windows; he would never suffer himself to be deluded—never be led away by deceptive hopes again; and he went away, not without bitterness, yet with a certain stern sense of the inevitable which calmed down his passion. Whenever he had been in his right senses, he had felt that this must be the end; and the thing for him now was to bear

it with such courage and steadiness as he could muster to face the emergency. It was all over at least. There were no intermediary tortures to go through, and there was always some comfort in that.

His absence was not taken any notice of at the breakfast-table, though Sara gave many a wondering glance at the door, and had a puzzled, half-irritated look upon her face, which some of her friends perceived, though her father did not observe it. He, for his part, came down radiant. He looked weary, and explained that he had not slept very well; but he had never been in more genial spirits, never more affectionate or full of schemes for everybody's pleasure. He called Jack apart, to tell him that, after looking over matters, he found he could let him have the hunter he wanted, a horse upon which his heart was set. When they were all talking at table in the usual morning flutter of letters and mutual bits of news, Mr Brownlow intimated that he had thoughts of taking Sara to Italy, where she had so long desired to go; "making up a party and enjoying ourselves," he said. Sara looked up with a gleam of delight, but her eyes were immediately after diverted to the door, where somebody was coming in—somebody, but not the person she was looking for. As for Jack, he received the intimation of his father's liberality in perplexed silence; for if he was to marry, and sink

into the position of a clerk in Masterton, hunters would be little in his way. But their father was too much absorbed in his own satisfaction to remark particularly how they both took his proposed kindness. He was overflowing to everybody. Though he was always kind, that morning he was kinder than ever; and the whole party brightened up under his influence, notwithstanding Jack's perplexity, and Sara's wondering impatient glances at the door. Nobody asked what had become of the stranger. Mr Brownlow's guests were free to come to breakfast when they liked, and no notice was taken of the defaulters. The meal, however, was so merry and friendly, that everybody sat longer over it than usual. Several of the visitors were going away, and the sportsmen had laid aside their guns for the day to join the ladies in an excursion. There was plenty of time for everything; pleasant bustle, pleasant idleness, no "wretched business," as Sara said, to quicken their steps; and she was, perhaps, the only one in the party who was ill at ease. She could not make out how it was that Powys did not come. She sat and joined with forced gaiety in the general conversation, and she had not courage to ask frankly what had become of him. When they all began at last to disperse from the table, she made one feeble effort to satisfy herself. "Mr Powys has never come

down to breakfast," she said to Jack, avoiding his eye; "had not you better see if there is any reason?"

"If he is ill, perhaps, poor dear?" said Jack, with scorn. "Don't be afraid—probably he went out early; he is not the sort of fellow to fall ill."

"Probably some of you have insulted him!" said Sara, hotly, under her breath; but either Jack did not or would not hear. And she could not trust herself to look up in the face of the assembled company and ask. So she had to get up with all the rest, and go reluctantly away from the table, with a certain sense of impending misfortune upon her. A few minutes after, when she was sent for to go to her father in the library, Sara's courage failed her altogether. She felt he must have something important to say to her, something that could not be postponed. And her heart beat loudly as she went to him. When she entered the room Mr Brownlow came forward to meet her. It struck her for the first time as he advanced that his face had changed; something that had been weighing upon him had passed away. The lines of his mouth had relaxed and softened; he was like what he used to be. It was almost the first time she fully realised that for some time past he had not been like himself. He came forward, and before she had fully mastered her first impression, took her into his arms.



"My dear child," he said, "I have sent for you to tell you that a great burden that has been upon my mind for some time has just been taken off. You have been very good to me, Sara, very patient and obedient and sweet; and though I never told you about it in so many words, I want you to be the first to know that it has passed away."

"Thank you, papa," said Sara, looking wistfully in his face. "I am sure I am very glad, though I don't know what you mean. Is it anything about——? Am I to know what it was?" And she stopped, standing so close with his arm round her, and gave him an appealing look—a look that asked far more than her words—that seemed even to see into him, and divine; but that could not be.

"It is not worth while now," he said, smoothing her hair with his hand. "It is all over; and, my darling, I want you to know also that I set you free."

"Set me free?" said Sara, in a whisper; and in spite of herself she turned very pale.

"Yes, Sara, quite free. I ask no sacrifice of you now," said Mr Brownlow, pressing her close with his arm. "Forgive me that I ever thought of it. Even at the worst, you know I told you to consult your own heart; and now you are free, quite free. All that is at an end."

"All what?" asked Sara, under her breath; and she turned her head away from him, resisting the effort he made to look at her. "What is it you set me free from?" she continued, in a petulant tone. "If you don't tell me in words, how am I to know?"

Mr Brownlow was startled and checked in his effusiveness, but he could not be angry with her at such a moment. "Hush," he said, still smoothing her pretty hair, "we have never had many words about it. It is all at an end. I thought it would be a relief to you to hear."

"To hear what?" cried the girl, sharply, with her head averted; and then, to her father's utter consternation, she withdrew as far as she could from his arm, and suddenly burst into tears.

Mr Brownlow was totally taken by surprise. He had not been able to read what was going on in his daughter's heart. He could not believe now that she understood him. He put his hand upon her arm and drew her back. "You mistake me, my darling," he said; "I mean that you are quite free, Sara—quite free. It was wrong of me to ask any promise from you, and it was foolish of you to give it. But Providence, thank God, has settled that. It is all over. There is no more necessity. Can't you forgive me? You have not suffered so much from

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it as I have done. Before I could have come to the point of sacrificing you——”

“Sacrificing *me*!” cried Sara, suddenly, flashing back upon him in a storm of passion and indignation, her cheeks scorching yet wet with tears, her big eyes swimming. “Is that all you think of? You had a right to sacrifice me if you liked—nobody would have said a word. They did it in the Bible. You might have cut me into little pieces if you liked. But oh, what right had you, how dared you to make a sacrifice of *him*?”

“*Him*!” cried Mr Brownlow, and he took a step back in consternation and gazed at his child, who was transfigured, and a different creature. Her cheeks blazed under her tears, but she did not shrink. Weeping, blushing, wounded, ashamed, she still confronted him in the strength of some new feeling of which he had never dreamed.

“You never say a word about him!” cried Sara. “You speak of me, and you had a right to do whatever you liked with me; but it is him whom you have sacrificed. He never would have thought of it but for you. He never would have come back after *that* time but for you. And then you expect me to think only of myself, and to be glad when you say I am free! How can I be free? I led him on, and made him speak when he knew better. Oh, papa,

you are cruel, cruel ! He was doing you no harm, and you have made him wretched ; and now you think it doesn't matter ; but that is not the way with me ! ”

“ Sara, are you mad ? ” cried Mr Brownlow in his dismay ; but Sara made him no answer. She sat down on the nearest chair, and, turning round away from him, leaned her arms on the back of it, and put down her head on her arms. He could see that she was crying, but that was all ; and nothing he could say, neither consolations, nor excuses, nor reproofs, would induce her to raise her head. It was the first quarrel she had ever had with the father who had been father and mother both to her ; and the acuteness of her first disappointment, the first cross in her pleasant life, the unexpected humiliating end of her first dreams, roused a wild rebellion in her heart. She was wroth, and her heart was sore, and outraged. When he was called away by Willis about some business, he left her there, still twisted round upon her chair, with her face upon her folded arms, spending her very soul in tears. But the moment he was gone she sprang up and fled to the shelter of her own room. “ They shall find that it is not the way with me ! ” she said to herself, and gave herself up wilfully to thoughts of the banished lover who had been treated so cruelly. On that day, at least,

Sara avenged poor Powys's wrongs upon the company in general. She had a headache, and could not join in their excursion. And her eyes were still red with crying when next she was seen down-stairs. Mr Brownlow tried to persuade himself it was too violent to last, and thought it prudent to take no more notice, but was very obsequious and conciliatory all the evening to his naughty child. Even when it was thus brought before him, he did not make much account of the sacrifice of Powys. And he thought Sara would come round and see things by-and-by in their true light. But all the same the shock had a great effect upon him, and damped him strangely in the first effusion of his joy.

But he was kind, kinder to everybody in his gratitude to Providence. Except that he had no pity for Powys, who seemed to him to have been all this time a kind of impostor, his good-fortune softened his heart to every other creature. When he met Pamela on the road, though Pamela was the one other individual in the world with whom Jack's father was not in perfect charity, he yet stopped kindly to speak to her. "I hope your mother has not gone upon a long journey. I hope she is coming back," he said, in a fatherly way. "She should not have left you by yourself alone."

"It was on business," said Pamela, not daring

to lift her eyes. "She said she would be soon back."

"Then you must take great care of yourself while she is away," Mr Brownlow said, and took off his hat as he left her, with the courtesy which was natural to him. He was so kind to everybody; that day in particular he looked after the pretty creature with a pang of compunction. He did not care much for Powys, but he was sorry for Pamela. "Poor little thing!" he said to himself—for while he said it he thought of launching Jack, as it was Jack's ambition to be launched, upon public life, getting him into the House of Commons, sending him out to the world, where he would soon forget his humble little love. Mr Brownlow felt that this was what would happen, and his heart for the moment ached over poor Pamela. She was so pretty, and soft, and young, and then she reminded him—though of whom he could not quite say.

Thus the day went on; and the next day Mr Brownlow went to the office, where everything was as usual. He saw by his first glance that Powys was at his desk, and he was pleased, though he took no notice. Perhaps a certain unacknowledged compunction, after all, was in his mind. He even sent for Mr Wrinkell and consulted him as to the fitness of the junior clerk for a more responsible post. Mr

Wrinkell was a cautious man, but he could not conceal a certain favouritism. "Ever since that first little cloud that passed over him, he has been worth any two in the office," he said—"any two, sir; but I don't think he is happy in his mind."

"Not happy?" said Mr Brownlow; "but you know, Wrinkell, we cannot be expected to remedy that."

"No, of course not," said Mr Wrinkell; "it may be only seriousness, and then it will be all the better for him; but if it is not that, it is something that has gone wrong. At his age a cross in some fancy is enough sometimes—not that I have any ground for saying so; but still I think sometimes when I look at him that some little affair of *that* description may have gone wrong."

"It is possible enough," said Mr Brownlow, with a smile, which was somewhat grim; "fortunately that sort of thing don't kill."

"N-no," said Mr Wrinkell, gravely; but he did not say any more, and his employer did not feel more comfortable after he was gone; and Powys was promoted accordingly, and did his business with a certain sternness, never moving, never looking round when Mr Brownlow came into the office, taking no notice of him; till the lawyer, who had come to have a certain fondness for the young man,

felt hurt and vexed, he could not have told why. He was glad to see him there—glad he was too manful and stout-hearted to have disappeared and abandoned his work; but he would have felt grateful and indebted to him had he once raised his head and seemed conscious of his presence. Powys, however, was no more than human, and there was a limit to his powers. He was busy with his work, but yet the sense of his grievance was full in his mind. He was saying to himself, with less vehemence but more steadiness, what Sara had said. He never would have thought of it but for Mr Brownlow—never would have gone back after *that* time but for him; and his heart was sore, and he could not forgive him like a Christian—not the first day.

However, they had a cheerful evening at Brownlows that night. There were more reasons than one why it should be a night of triumph for the master of the house. His terrors had all died out of his mind. The cloud that had so long overshadowed him had vanished, and *it was the last day!* Nobody knew it but himself; doubtless nobody was thinking of any special crisis. Mr Brownlow went, he scarcely knew from what feeling, in a kind of half-conscious bravado, to see old Mrs Fennell, and found her still raving of something which seemed to him no



longer alarming, but the merest idiocy. He was so genial and charitable that he even thought of Nancy and her troubles, and told her she must get a nurse to help her, and then she could be free to go and see her friends. "For I think you told me you had some friends," Mr Brownlow said, with an amiability that cowed Nancy, and made her tremble. Nancy Christian! When he heard her mistress call her, he suddenly recollected the other name which he had seen so lately, and came back to ask her about a Mary Christian of the Isle of Man, and got certain particulars which were startling to him. Nancy could tell him who she was. She was a farmer's daughter related to the Fennells, and had married "a gentleman's son." The information gave Mr Brownlow a curious shock, but he was a good deal exhausted with various emotions, and did not feel that much. So he went home carrying a present for Sara—a pretty locket—though she had too many of such trinkets already. He meant to tell her it was an anniversary, though not what anniversary it was. And he took his cheque-book and wrote a cheque for a large amount for the chief charities in Masterton, but did not tear it out, leaving it there locked up with the book till tomorrow; for it was late, and the banks were shut. If any poor suppliant had come to him that day

with a petition, right or wrong its prayer would have been granted. Mr Brownlow had received a great deliverance from God—so he phrased it—and it was but his simple duty to deliver others if possible in sign of his gratitude. All but young Powys, whom he had deluded, and who had deluded him; all but Phœbe Thomson, who was just about to be consigned to oblivion, and about whom and whose fortunes henceforward no soul would have any inducement to care.

Sara, too, had softened a little out of that first rebellion which Mr Brownlow knew could not last. She was not particularly cordial to her father, but still she wore the locket he had given her in sign of amity, and exerted herself at dinner to amuse the guests. Fresh people had arrived that day, and the house was very full—so full, that Mr Brownlow had no chance of a moment's conversation with his children, except by positively detaining them after everybody was gone, as Jack had done on the night of Powys's arrival. He took this step, though it was a very decided one, for he felt it necessary that some clear understanding should be come to. And he had such bribes to offer them. After everybody else had retired, Jack and Sara came to him in the library. This room, which a little while ago had been the least interesting in the house, was gradually

collecting associations round it, and becoming the scene of all the most important incidents in this eventful period of the family life. Jack came in half careless, half anxious, thinking something might be about to be said concerning his personal affairs, yet feeling that his father had no particular right to interfere, and no power to decide. And Sara was sulky. It is an ugly word, but it was the actual state of the case. She was injured, and sore in her heart, and yet she was too young and too much accustomed to her own way to consider the matter desperate, or to have reached the dignity of despair. So she was only sullen, offended, disposed to make herself disagreeable. It was not a promising audience whom Mr Brownlow thus received with smiles in his own room. It was only about eleven o'clock, his impatience having hastened the hour of general separation; and the young people were not perfectly pleased with *that*, any more than with his other arrangements. Both the lamps in the library were lighted, and there was a fire burning. The room, too, seemed to have brightened up. Mr Brownlow put Sara into one of the big chairs, with a tenderness which almost overcame her, and himself took up an Englishman's favourite position on the hearth.

"I want to speak to you both," he said. He was

eager, and yet there was a certain embarrassment in his tone. "This is an important night in my life. I can't enter into particulars—indeed there is no room for them—but I have been waiting for this night to speak seriously to you both. Jack, I doubt whether you will ever do much at the business. I should have liked had you given your mind to it, to keep it up ; for a business like mine is a capital backing to a fortune, and without it you can't hope to be rich—not rich beyond competence, you know. However, it does not seem to me, I confess, that business, of our kind at least, is your turn."

"I was not aware I had been unsatisfactory, sir," said Jack. "I don't think I have been doing worse than usual——"

"That is not what I mean," said Mr Brownlow. "I mean you are better adapted for something else. I wrote to my old friend Lord Dewsbury about you to-day. If anything should turn up in the way he once proposed, I should not mind releasing you altogether from the office—and increasing your allowance. It could not be a great deal, recollect ; but still if that is what you would really give your mind to—I should see that you had enough to keep your place."

Jack's eyes had gradually brightened as his

father proceeded. Now he made a step forward, and a gleam of delight came into his face. "Do you really mean it?" he cried; "it is awfully good of you. Of course I should give my mind to it. It is what I most care for in the world—except——" Jack paused, and other things came into his mind. "If you are making a sacrifice to please me——" he began slowly.

"We have all to make sacrifices," said Mr Brownlow. "A few days ago I thought I should have had to make a sacrifice of a very different kind. Providence has been good to me, and now I should like to do the best for my children. There are only two of you," said Mr Brownlow, softening. "It would be hard if I did not do all I could to make the best of your lives."

And then there was a pause. He meant what he said, and he had always been a good father, and they loved him dearly. But at this moment, though he was offering to his son the realisation of his dreams, they both distrusted him, and he felt it. They looked at him askance, these two young creatures who owed everything to him. They were doubtful of his great offers. They thought he was attempting to bribe them, and beguile them out of the desire of their hearts. And he stood looking at them, feeling in his own heart that he was not

natural but plausible and conciliatory, thinking of their good, no doubt, but also of his own will. He felt this, but still he was angry that they should feel it. And it was with still more conscious embarrassment that he began again.

"The time has come in my own life when I am ready to make a change," he said. "I want a little rest. I want to go away and see you enjoy yourselves, and take a holiday before I die. I can afford it after working so long. I want to take you to Italy, my darling, where you have so long wanted to go; but I should like to establish things on a new footing first. I should make some arrangement about the business; unless, indeed, Jack has changed his ideas. Public life is very uncertain. If you think," said Mr Brownlow, not without a certain tinge of derision in his tone, "that you would rather be Brownlow of Masterton, with a safe, long-established hereditary connection to fall back upon, it is not for me to precipitate your decision. You can take time and think over what I say."

"There is no occasion for taking time to think," said Jack, with a little irritation. But there he stopped. It was getting towards midnight; the house was quiet; everything was still, except the wind sighing outside among the falling leaves. Sara, who was the least occupied of the three, had

thought she heard the sound of wheels in the avenue, but it was so unlikely at that time of the night that she concluded it must be only the wind. As they all stood there, however, silent, the quiet was suddenly broken. All at once, into the midst of their conversation, came the sound of the great house-bell, rung violently. It made them all start, so unexpected was the sound, and so perfect was the stillness. At that hour who could be coming to disturb them? The bell was unusually large and loud, and the sound of it echoing down into the bowels, as it were, of the silent house, was startling enough. And then there was the sound of a voice outside. The library was at the back of the house; but still, when their attention was thus violently aroused, they could hear that there was a voice. And the bell rang again loudly — imperiously — wildly. Jack was the first to move. "Willis must be asleep," he said. "But who on earth can it be?" and he hastened towards the door, to give the untimely visitor entrance. But his father called him back.

"I hear Willis moving," he said; "never mind. It must be somebody by the last train from town. Did you ask any one? There is just time to have driven over from the last train."

"It must be some telegram," said Jack. "I

expect nobody this week," and they all stood and waited; Sara, too, having risen from her chair. The young people were a little disturbed, though they feared nothing; and Mr Brownlow looked at them tenderly, like a man who had nothing to fear.

"Happily we are all here," he said. "If it is a telegram, it can only be about business." He stood leaning against the mantelpiece, with his eyes fixed on the door. There was a flutter at his heart somehow, but he did not feel that he was afraid. And they could hear Willis fumbling over the door, and an impatient voice outside. Whatever it was, it was very urgent, and Jack, growing anxious in spite of himself, would have gone to see. But again his father called him back. Something chill and terrible was stealing over Mr Brownlow; he was growing pale—he was hoarse when he spoke. But he neither moved, nor would he let his son move, and stood propping himself up, with a livid countenance, and gazing at the door.

When it opened they all started, and Mr Brownlow himself gave a hoarse cry. It was not a telegram, nor was it a stranger. It was a figure they were well used to see, and with which they had no tragic associations. She came in like a ghost, black, pale, and swift, in a passion of eagerness, with a large old silver watch in her hand. "I am



not too late," she said with a gasp, and held it up close to Mr Brownlow's face. And then she stood still and looked at him, and he knew it all if she had not said another word. It was Pamela's mother, the woman whom, two days before, he had helped into the carrier's cart at his own gate.

## CHAPTER XXXVI.

### MOMENTARY MADNESS.

It would be difficult to describe the looks of the assembled party in the library at Brownlows at this moment. Jack, to whom everything was doubly complicated by the fact that the intruder was Pamela's mother, and by the feeling that his own affairs must be somehow in question, made a step forward, thinking that her business must be with him, and fell back in double consternation when she passed him, looking only at his father. Sara stood aghast, knowing nothing—not even aware that there could be anything to be anxious about—an impersonation of mere wonder and surprise. The two elder people were not surprised. Both of them knew what it meant. Mr Brownlow in a moment passed from the shock of horror and dismay which had prostrated him at first, into that perfect calm which is never consistent with ignorance or innocence. The won-

der of his children would have convinced any observer of their perfect unacquaintance with the matter. But he knew all about it—he was perfectly composed and master of himself in a second. Life goes fast at such a crisis. He felt at once as if he had always known it was to end like this—always foreseen it—and had been gradually prepared and wound up by degrees to meet the blow. All his uncertainty and doubt and self-delusions vanished from him on the spot. He knew who his visitor was without any explanation, and that she had come just in time—and that it was all over. Somehow he seemed to cease on the moment to be the principal in the matter. By the time Mrs Preston had come up to him, he had become a calm professional spectator, watching the case on behalf of a client. The change was curious to himself, though he had no time just then to consider how it came about.

But the intruder was not calm. On the contrary, she was struggling with intense excitement, panting, trembling, compelled to stop on her way across the room to put her hand to her side, and gasp for the half-stifled breath. She took no notice of the young people who stood by. It is doubtful even whether she was aware of their presence. She went up gasping to the man she thought her enemy. "I am in time," she said. "I have come to claim my mother's

money—the money you have robbed us of. I am in time—I know I am just in time! I have been at Doctors' Commons; it's no use telling me lies. I know everything. I've come for my mother's money—the money you've robbed from me and mine!"

Jack came forward bewildered by these extraordinary words. "This is frenzy," he said. "The Rector is right. She must be mad. Mrs Preston, come and I'll take you home. Don't let us make any row about it. She is Pamela's mother. Let me take her quietly away."

"I might be mad," said the strange apparition, "if wrong could make a woman mad. Don't talk to me of Pamela. Sir, you understand it's you I come to—it's you! Give me my mother's money! I'll not go away from here till I have justice. I'll have you taken up for a robber! I'll have you put in prison! It's justice I want—and my rights."

"Be quiet, Jack," said Mr Brownlow; "let her alone. Go away—that is the best service you can do me. Mrs Preston, you must explain yourself. Who was your mother, and what do you want with me?"

Then she made a rush forward to him and clutched his arm. He was standing in his former position leaning against the mantelpiece, firm, upright, pale, a strong man still, and with his energies unbroken.

She rushed at him, a tottering, agitated woman, old and weak and half-frantic with excitement. "Give me my mother's money!" she cried, and gasped and choked, her passion being too much for her. At this instant the clock struck: it was a silvery, soft-tongued clock, and made the slow beats of time thrill into the silence. Mr Brownlow laughed when he heard it—laughed not with triumph, but with that sense of the utter futility of all calculations which sometimes comes upon the mind with a strange sense of the humour of it, at the most terrible crisis. Let it strike—what did it matter?—nothing now could deliver him from his fate.

"I take you to witness I was here and claimed my money before it struck," cried the woman. "I was here. You can't change that. You villain, give me my mother's money! Give me my money: you've had it for five-and-twenty years!"

"Compose yourself," said Mr Brownlow, speaking to her as he might have done had he been the professional adviser of the man who was involved; "sit down and take your time; you were here before twelve; you shall have all the benefit of that; now tell me what your name is, and what is your claim."

Mrs Preston sat down as he told her, and glared at him with her wild bright eyes; but notwithstand-

ing the overwrought condition in which she was, she could not but recognise the calm of the voice which addressed her : a certain shade of uncertainty flickered over her countenance—she grew confused in the midst of her assurance—it seemed impossible that he could take it so quietly if he knew what she meant. And then her bodily fatigue, sleeplessness, and exhaustion were beginning to tell.

“You are trying to cheat me,” she said, with difficulty restraining the impulse of her weakness to cry. “You are trying to cheat me! you know it better than I do, and I read it with my own eyes: you have had it for five-and-twenty years: and you try to face it out and cheat me now!”

Then the outburst came which had been kept back so long; she had eaten nothing all day; she had not slept the previous night; she had been travelling and rushing about till the solid earth seemed to be going round and round with her; she burst into sobbing and crying as she spoke: not tears—she was not capable of tears. When Mr Brownlow, in his extraordinary self-possession, went to a side-table to bring a decanter of sherry which had been placed there, she made an effort to rise to stop him, but even that she was unable to do. He walked across the room while his astonished children still stood and looked on. He alone had all his wits about

him, and sense enough to be compassionate. He filled out a glass of wine with a steady hand and brought it to her. "Take this," he said, "and then you will be more able to tell me what you mean."

Mrs Preston looked up at him, struck dumb with wonder in the midst of her agitation. She was capable of thinking he meant to poison her—probably that was the first idea in her mind; but when she looked up and saw the expression in his face, it calmed her in spite of herself. She took the glass from him as if she could not help it, and swallowed the wine in an unwilling yet eager way—for her bodily exhaustion craved the needful support, though her mind was against it. She began to shake and tremble all over as Mr Brownlow took the glass from her hand: his quietness overwhelmed her. If he had turned her out of the room, out of the house, it would have seemed more natural than this.

"Father," said Jack, interposing, "I have seen her like this before—I don't know what she has in her head, but of course I can't stand by and see her get into trouble: if you will go away I will take her home."

Mr Brownlow smiled again, a curious smile of despair, once more seeing the humour, as it were, of the situation. "It will be better for you to take Sara away," he said; "go, both of you—it does not

matter." Then, having fallen into this momentary incoherence, he recovered himself and turned round to his visitor. "Now tell me," he said gently, "who you are and what you mean?"

But by this time it did not seem as if she were able to speak—she sat and stared at him, her dark eyes shining wildly out of her old pallid face. "I have seen the will—I have been at Doctors' Commons," she gulped out by degrees; "I know it must be true."

"Who are you?" said Mr Brownlow.

Then the poor trembling creature got up and made a rush towards him again. "You know who I am," she said, "but that don't matter, as you say: I was Phoebe Thomson; give me my mother's money—ah! give me the money that belongs to my child! give me my fortune! there's witnesses that I came in time; I came in time—I came in time!" screamed forth the exhausted woman. She had lost all command of herself by this time, and shrieked out the words, growing louder and louder; then all at once, without any warning, she fell down at the feet of the man she was defying—fell in a dead bundle on the floor, in a faint—almost, as it seemed for the moment, dead.

Mr Brownlow, for one dreadful second, thought she was dead. The moment was terrible beyond all



description, worse than anything that had yet befallen him ; a thrill of hope, an awful sickening of suspense came over him ; for the first time he, too, lost his senses : he did not stoop to raise her, nor take any means for her restoration, but stood looking down upon her, watching, as a man might watch the wild beast which had been about to kill him, writhing under some sudden shot. A man would not interpose in such a case with surgical aid for the wounded lion or tiger. Neither did Mr Brownlow feel himself moved to interfere. He only stood and looked on. But his children were not wound up to the same state of feeling. Jack rushed forward and lifted his Pamela's mother from the floor, and Sara flew to her aid with feminine succours. They laid her on the sofa, and put water on her face, and did everything they knew to restore her. Mr Brownlow did not interfere ; he could not bid them stop ; it never even occurred to him to attempt to restrain their charitable offices. He left them to themselves, and walked heavily up and down the room on the other side, waiting till she should come to herself. For of course she would come to herself—he had no doubt of that. After the first instant it was clearly enough apparent to him that such a woman at such a moment would not die.

When Mrs Preston came to herself, she tried to

get up from the sofa, and looked at them all with a piteous look of terror and helplessness. She was a simple uneducated woman, making little distinction between different kinds of crime—and it seemed to her as if a man who had defrauded her (as she thought) all these years, might very well mean to murder her when he was found out. She did not see the difference. She shuddered as she fell back on the cushions unable to rise. “Would you like to kill me?” she said faintly, looking in their faces. She was afraid of them, and she was helpless and alone. She did not feel even as if she had the strength to cry out. And there were three of them—they could put out her feeble flickering flame of life if they pleased. As for the two young people whom she addressed in the first place, they supposed simply that she was raving. But Mr Brownlow, who was, in his way, as highly strained as she was, caught the words. And the thought flashed through his mind as if some one had held up a picture to him. What would it matter if she were to die? She was old—she had lived long enough—she was not so happy that she should wish to live longer; and her child—others might do better for her child than she could. It was not his fault. It was her words that called up the picture before him, and he made a few steps forward and put his children away,

and came up to the sofa and looked at her. An old, faint, feeble, worn-out woman. A touch would do it ; —her life was like the last sere leaves fluttering on the end of the branches ; a touch would do it. He came and looked at her, not knowing what he did, and put his children away. And there was something in his eyes which made her shrink into the corner of her couch and tremble and be silent. He was looking to see how it could be done—by some awful unconscious impulse, altogether apart from any will or thought of his. And a touch would do it. This was what was in his eyes when he told his children to go away.

“Go—go to bed,” he said, “I will take care of Mrs Preston.” There was a horrible appearance of meaning in his voice, but yet he did not know what he meant. He stood and looked down upon her gloomily. Yes, that was all that stood between him and peace ; a woman whom any chance touch—any blast bitterer than usual—any accidental fall, might kill. “Go to bed, children,” he repeated harshly. It seemed to him somehow as if it would be better, as if he would be more at liberty, when they were away.

“Oh, no—no,” said Mrs Preston, moaning. “Don’t leave me—don’t leave me. You wouldn’t see any harm come to me, for my Pamela’s sake !”

And then both his children looked into Mr Brownlow's face. I cannot tell what they saw there. I doubt whether they could have told themselves; but it was something that thrilled them through and through, which came back to them from time to time all their lives, and which they could never forget. Jack turned away from his father with a kind of horror, and went and placed himself beside Mrs Preston at the head of the sofa. But Sara, though her dismay was still greater, went up to him and clasped his arm with both her hands. "Papa," she said, "come away. Come with me. I don't know what it means, but it is too much for you. Come, papa."

Mr Brownlow once more put her away with his hand. "Go to bed, Sara," he said; and then freeing himself, he went across the room to the curtained windows, and stared out as if they were open, and came back again. The presence of his children was an oppression to him. He wanted them away. And then he stood again by the side of the sofa and looked at his visitor. "We can talk this over best alone," he said; and at the sound of his voice, and a movement which she thought Jack made to leave her, she gave a sudden cry.

"He will kill me if you go away!" she said. "Oh, don't leave me to him! I—don't mean to

injure you—I—— But you're in league with him," she exclaimed, rising suddenly with the strength of excitement, and rushing to the other end of the room; "you are all against me. I shall be killed—I shall be killed! Murder! murder!—though I don't want to hurt you. I want nothing but my rights."

She got behind the writing-table in her insane terror, and threw herself down there on her knees, propping herself up against it, and watching them as from behind a barricade, with her pallid thin face supported on the table. With her hands she drew a chair to each side of her. She was like a wild creature painfully barricading herself—sheltering her feeble strength within intrenchments, and turning her face to the foe. Mr Brownlow stood still and looked at her, but this time with a stupefied look which meant nothing; and as for Jack he stood aghast, half-frightened, half-angry, not knowing if she were mad, or what it was. When either of them moved, she crouched together and cried out, thinking they were about to rush upon her. For the moment she was all but mad—mad with excitement, fright, evil-thinking, and ignorance—ignorance most of all,—seeing no reason why, if they had done one wrong, they should not do another. Kill or defraud, which did it matter?—and for the

moment she was out of her senses, and knew not what she did or said.

Sara was the only one who retained her wits at this emergency. She stepped behind the screen made by the table without pausing to think about it. "Mrs Preston," she said, "I don't know what is the matter with you. You look as if you had gone mad; but I am not frightened. What do you mean by calling murder here? Come with me to my room and go to bed. It is time everybody was in bed. I will take care of you. You are tired to death, and not fit to be up. Come with me."

"You!" cried Mrs Preston—"you! You that have had everything my Pamela ought to have had! You that have been kept like a princess on my money! You!—but don't let them kill me," she cried out the next moment, shuddering and turning towards the other woman for protection. "You're but a girl. Come here and stand by me, and save me, and I'll stand by you. You shall always have a home. I'll be as good to you—but save me! don't let them kill me!" she cried, frantically throwing her arms round Sara's waist. It was a curious sight. The girl stood erect, her slight figure swaying with the unusual strain upon it, her face lit up with such powerful emotions as she had never known before, looking wistful, alarmed, wondering,

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proud, upon her father and her brother at the other side, while the old woman clung to her, crouching at her feet, hiding her face in her dress, clasping her waist as for life and death. Sara had accepted the office thrust upon her, whatever it was. She had become responsible for the terrified, exhausted claimant of all Mr Brownlow's fortune—and turned round upon the two astonished men with something new to them, something that was almost defiance, in her eyes.

"I don't know what it means," she said, laying her long, soft, shapely hand upon Mrs Preston's shoulder like the picture of a guardian angel ; "but it has gone past your managing, and I must take charge of her. Jack, open the door, and keep out of the way. She must come with me."

And then, indeed, Mr Brownlow within himself, in the depths of his heart, uttered a groan, which made some outward echo. He was in the last crisis of his fate, and his cherished child forsook him and took his adversary's part. He withdrew himself and sank down into a chair, clearing the way, as she had bidden. Sara had taken charge of her. Sara had covered the intruder for ever and ever with the shield of her protection ; and yet it was for Sara alone that he could have found in his heart to murder this woman, as she said. When Sara stood

forth and faced him in her young strength and pride, a sudden Lady of Succour, it cast him to the earth. And he gave that groan, and sank down and put himself aside, as it were. He could not carry on the struggle. When Sara heard it her heart smote her; she turned to him eagerly, not to comfort him, but to defend herself.

"Well!" she said, "if it was nothing, you would not have minded. It must be something, or you would never——" And then she stopped and shuddered. "I am going to take charge of her to-night," she added, low and hurriedly. "I will take her to my room, and stay with her all night. To-morrow, perhaps, we may know what it means. Jack, she can walk, if you will clear the way."

Then Mr Brownlow looked up with an indescribable pang at his heart, and saw his daughter lead, half carrying, his enemy away. "I will take her to my room, and stay with her all night." He had felt the emphasis and meaning that was in the words, and he had seen Sara shudder. Good heavens! what was it for? Was he a man to do murder? What was it his child had read in his eye? In this horrible confusion of thought he sat and watched the stranger out. She had made good her lodgment, not only in the house, but in the innermost chamber, in Sara's room—in Sara's pro-



tecting presence, where nothing could get near her. And it was against him that his child had taken up this wretched woman's defence! He neither moved nor spoke for some minutes after they had left the room. The bitterness had all to be tasted and swallowed before his thoughts could go forward to other things, and to the real final question. By degrees, however, as he came to himself, he became aware that he was not yet left free to think about the final question. Jack was still beside him. He did not say anything, but he was moving and fidgeting about the room with his hands in his pockets in a way which proved that he had something to say. As Mr Brownlow came to himself he gradually woke to a perception of his son's restless figure beside him, and knew that he had another explanation to make.

"I don't want to trouble you," said Jack at last, abruptly, "but I should very much like to know, sir, what all this means. If Mrs Preston is mad—as—God knows I don't want to think it," cried the young man, "but one must believe one's eyes—if she is mad, why did you give in to her, and humour her? Why did not you let me take her away?"

"I don't think she is mad," said Mr Brownlow, slowly.

Upon which Jack came to a dead stop, and stared

at his father—"Good heavens, sir," he said, "what can you mean?"

"I don't know," said Mr Brownlow, getting up in his turn. "My head is not quite clear to-night. Leave me now. I'll tell you after. I'll tell you—some time;—I mean in the morning." Then he walked once more across the room, and threw himself into the big easy-chair by the dying fire. One of the lamps had run down, and was flickering out, throwing strange quivers of light and shade about the room. An indescribable change had come over it; it had been bright, and now it looked desolate; it had been the home of peace, and now the very air was heavy with uncertainty and a kind of hovering horror. Mr Brownlow threw himself wearily into the big chair, and covered his face with his hands. A moment after he seemed to recollect himself, and looked up and called Jack back. "My boy," he said, "something has happened to-night which I did not look for. You must consider everything I said to you before as cancelled. It appears I was premature. I am sorry—for you, Jack."

"Don't be sorry for me," cried Jack, with a generous impulse. "It could not have made much matter anyhow—my life is decided, come what may."

Then his father looked up at him sharply, but with a quiver in his lip. "Ah!" he said; and Jack

perceived somehow, he did not know how, that he had unwittingly inflicted a new wound. "It could not have made much matter—true," he said, and rose up and bowed to his son as if he had been a stranger. "That being the case, perhaps the less we say to each other the better now——"

"What have I said, sir?" cried Jack in amaze.

"Enough, enough," said Mr Brownlow, "enough"—whether it was in answer to his question, or by way of putting an end to the conversation Jack could not tell; and then his father waved him away, and sat down again, once more burying his face in his hands. Again the iron had entered his soul. Both of them!—all he had in the world—his fortune, his position, his son, his daughter, must all go? It seemed to him now as if the external things were nothing in comparison of these last. Sara, for whose sake alone he feared it—Jack, whom he had not petted—whom perhaps he had crossed a little as fathers will, but whom at bottom—never mind, never mind! he said to himself. It was the way of the world. Sons did not take up their father's cause nowadays as a matter of course. They had themselves to think of—in fact, it was right they should think of themselves. The world was of much more importance to Jack than it could be to himself, for of course a young man had twice the length of time

to provide for that his father could possibly have. Never mind! He said it to himself with his head bowed down in his hands. But he did mind. "It would not make much matter anyhow"—no, not much matter. Jack would have it instead of Sara and Powys. It was the same kind of compromise that he had intended—only that the persons and the motive were changed.

Poor Jack in the mean time went about the room in a very disconsolate state. He was so startled in every way that he did not know what to think, and yet vague shadows of the truth were flickering about his mind. He knew something vaguely of the origin of his father's fortune, and nothing but that could explain it; and now he was offended at something. What could it be that he was offended at? It never occurred to Jack that his own words might bear the meaning that was set upon them; he was disconcerted and vexed, and did not know what to do. He went wandering about the room, lifting and replacing the books on the tables, and finally, after a long pause, he went up to his father again.

"I wish you'd have some confidence in me," he said. "I don't pretend to be wise, but still— And then if there is anything hanging over us, it is best that a fellow should know——"

"There is nothing hanging over *you*," said Mr

Brownlow, raising his head, almost with bitterness. "It will not matter much anyhow, you know. Don't think of waiting for me. I have a good deal to think over. In short, I should be very glad if you would leave me to myself and go——"

"As you please," said Jack, who was at last offended in his turn; and after he had made a discontented promenade all round the room, he lounged towards the door, still hoping he might be called back again. But he was not called back. On the contrary, his father's head had sunk again into his hands, and he had evidently retired into himself, beyond the reach of all fellowship or sympathy. Jack veered gradually towards the door, and went out of the room, with his hands in his pockets, and great trouble and perplexity in his mind. It seemed to him that he saw what the trouble must be, and that of itself was not pleasant. But bad as it might be, it was not so bad as the way his father was taking it. Good heavens, if he should hurt the old woman!—but surely he was not capable of that. And then Jack returned upon his own case, and felt wounded and sore. He was not a baby, that his father should decline to take him into his confidence. He was not a fool, that he should be supposed unequal to the emergency. Sleep was out of the question under the circumstances; and besides he did

not want to meet any of the fellows who might have been disturbed by Mrs Preston's cry, and might have come to his room for information. "Hang it all!" said Jack, as he threw himself on a sofa in the smoking-room, and lighted a dreary cigar. It was not a very serious malediction, but yet his mind was serious enough. Some terrible crisis in the history of his family was coming on, and he could only guess what it was. Something that involved not only his own prospects, but the prospects of his future wife. And yet nobody would tell him what was the meaning of it. It was hard lines for Jack.

When his son left the room, Mr Brownlow lifted his head out of his hands. He looked eagerly round the room, and made sure he was alone. And his countenance relaxed a little. He could venture to look as he felt, to throw off every mask when he was alone. Then he got up and walked heavily about. Was it all true? Had she come at the last moment and made her claim? Had she lighted down upon him, tracked him out, just as he was saying, and at last permitting himself to think, that all was over? A strange confusion swept over him as he sat and looked round the empty room. Was it possible that all this had happened since he was last alone in it? It was only a few hours since; and he had been scarcely able to believe that so

blessed a state of things could be true. He had sat there and planned every kind of kindness and bounty to everybody by way of expressing his gratitude to God. Was it possible? Could everything since then be so entirely changed? Or had he only dreamt the arrival of the sudden claimant, the striking of the clock too late, all the miseries of the night? As he asked himself these questions, a sudden shuddering came over him. There was one thing which he knew could be no dream. It was the suggestion which had come into his mind as he stood by the sofa. He seemed to see her before him, worn, old, feeble, and involuntarily his thoughts strayed away again to that horrible thought. What was the use of such a woman in the world? She had nothing before her but old age, infirmities, a lingering illness most likely, many sufferings, and death—only death at the end; that was the best, the only event awaiting her. To the young, life may blossom out afresh at any moment, but the old can only die—that is all that remains for them. And a touch would do it. It might save her from a great deal of suffering—it would certainly save her from the trial of a new position, the difficult transition from poverty to wealth. If he was himself as old, Mr Brownlow thought vaguely (all this was very vague—it was not breathed in articulate thought,

much less in words) that he would be glad to be put quietly out of the way. Heaven knows he would be grateful enough to any one even at that moment who would put him out of the way.

And it would be so easy to do it ; a touch would do it. The life was fluttering already in her pulses ; very likely the first severe cold would bring her down like the leaves off the trees ; and in the mean time what a difference her life would make. Mr Brownlow got up and began to walk about, not able to keep still any longer. The second lamp was now beginning to flicker for want of oil, and the room was darkening, though he did not perceive it. It would be the kindest office that could be done to an old woman ; he had often thought so. Suddenly there occurred to him a recollection of certain unhappy creatures in the workhouse at Masterton, who were so old that nothing was any pleasure to them. He thought of the life-in-death he had seen among them, the tedious blank, the animal half-existence, the dead, dull doze, out of which only a bad fit of coughing or some other suffering roused them ; and of his own passing reflection how kind it would be to mix them a sleeping potion only a little stronger, and let them be gone. It would be the best thing any one could do for them. It would be the best thing any one could do for *her* ; and then all the trouble, all



the vexation, all the misery and change that it would save !

As for the child, Mr Brownlow said to himself that all should go well with the child. He would not interfere. Jack should marry her if he pleased—all should go well with her ; and she would not have the difficult task of reconciling the world to her mother. In every way it seemed the desirable arrangement. If Providence would but interpose !—but then Providence never did interpose in such emergencies. Mr Brownlow went slowly up and down the darkening room, and his thoughts, too, went into the darkness. They went on as it were in a whisper and hid themselves, and silence came—hideous silence, in which the heart stood still, the genial breath was interrupted. He did not know what he was doing. He went to the medicine-chest which was in one corner, and opened it and looked at it. He did not even make a pretence of looking for anything : neither would the light have enabled him to look for anything. He looked at it and he knew that death was there, but he did not put forth his hand to touch it. At that moment all at once the flickering flame went out—went out just as a life might do, after fluttering and quivering and making wild rallies, again and again. Mr Brownlow for his part was almost glad there was no light. It made

him easier—even the lamp had seemed to look at him and see something in his eye!

Five minutes after, he found himself, he could not have told how, at the door of Sara's room. It was not in his way—he could not make that excuse to himself—to tell the truth he did not make any excuse to himself. His mind was utterly confused, and had stopped thinking. He was there, having come there he did not know how; and being there he opened the door softly and went in. Perhaps, for anything he could tell, the burden might have been too much for Sara. He went in softly, stealing so as not to disturb any sleeper. The room was dark, but not quite dark. There was a night-light burning, shaded, on the table, and the curtains were drawn at the head of the white bed: nothing stirred in the silence: only the sound of breathing, the irregular disturbed breathing of some one in a troubled sleep. Mr Brownlow stole further in, and softly put back one of the curtains of the bed. There she lay, old, pallid, wrinkled, worn-out, breathing hard in her sleep, even then unable to forget the struggle she was engaged in, holding the coverlet fast with one old meagre hand, upon which all the veins stood out. What comfort was her life to her? And a touch would do it. He went a step nearer and stooped over her, not knowing what he did, not



## CHAPTER XXXVII.

### THE MORNING LIGHT.

OF all painful things in this world there are few more painful than the feeling of rising up in the morning to a difficulty unsolved, a mystery unexplained. So long as the darkness is over with the night something can always be done. Calamity can be faced, misfortune met; but to get up in the morning light, and encounter afresh the darkness, and find no clue any more than you had at night, is hard work. This was what Jack felt when he had to face the sunshine, and remembered all that had happened, and the merry party that awaited him down-stairs, and that he must amuse his visitors as if this day had been like any other. If he but knew what had really happened! But the utmost he could do was to guess at it, and that in the vaguest way. The young man went down-stairs with a load on his mind, not so much of



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care as of uncertainty. Loss of fortune was a thing that could be met; but if there was loss of honour involved—if his father's brain was giving way with the pressure—if—— Jack would not allow his thoughts to go any further. He drew himself up with a sudden pull, and stopped short, and went down-stairs. At the breakfast-table everything looked horribly unchanged. The guests, the servants, the routine of the cheerful meal, were just as usual. Mr Brownlow, too, was at the table, holding his usual place. There was an ashy look about his face, which produced inquiries concerning his health from every new arrival; but his answers were so brief and unencouraging that these questions soon died off into silence. And he ate nothing, and his hand shook as he put his cup of coffee to his pallid lips. All these were symptoms that might be accounted for in the simplest way by a little bodily derangement. But Jack, for his part, was afraid to meet his father's eye. "Where is Sara?" he asked, as he took his seat. And then he was met—for he was late, and most of the party were down before him—by a flutter of regrets and wonder. Poor Sara had a headache—so bad a headache that she would not even have any one go into her room. "Angelique was keeping the door like a little tiger," one of the young ladies said,

"and would let nobody in." "And, oh, tell me who it was that came so late last night," cried another. "*You* must know. We are all at such a pitch of curiosity. It must be a foreign prince, or the prime minister, or some great beauty, we can't make up our minds which; and, of course, *it* is breakfasting in its own room this morning. Nobody will tell us who it was. Do tell us!—we are all dying to know."

"You will all be dreadfully disappointed," said Jack. "It was neither a prince nor a beauty. As for prime minister I don't know. Such things have been heard of as that a prime minister should be an old woman——"

"An old woman!" said his innocent interlocutor. "Then it must be Lady Motherwell. "Oh, I don't wonder poor Sara has a headache. But you know you are only joking. Her dear Charley would never let her come storming to anybody's door like that."

"It was not Lady Motherwell," said Jack. Heaven knows he was in no mood for jesting; but when it is a matter past talking of, what can a man do?

"Oh, then, I know who it must have been!" cried the spokeswoman of the party. She was, however, suddenly interrupted. Mr Brownlow, who had scarcely said a word as yet to any one, inter-



posed. There was something in his tone which somehow put them all to silence.

"I am sorry to put a stop to your speculations," he said. "It was only one of my clients on urgent business—that was all ; business," he added, with a curious kind of apology, "which has kept me up half the night."

"Oh, Mr Brownlow, I am so sorry. You are tired, and we have been teasing you," said the lively questioner, with quick compunction.

"No, not teasing me," he said, gravely. And then a dead silence ensued. It was not anything in his words. His words were simple enough ; and yet every one of his guests instantly began to think that his or her stay had been long enough, and that it was time to go away.

As Mr Brownlow spoke he met Jack's eye, and returned his look steadily. So far he was himself again. He was impenetrable, antagonistic, almost defiant. But there was no hovering horror in his look. He was terribly grave, and ashy pale, and bore traces that what had happened was no light matter. His look gave his son a sensation of relief, and perhaps encouraged him in levity of expression, though, Heaven knows, there was little levity in his mind.

"I told you," he said, "it might have been the prime minister, but it certainly was an old woman ;

and there I stop. I can't give any further information ; I am not one of the Privy Council." Then he laughed, but it was an uncomfortable laugh. It deepened the silence all around, and looked like a family quarrel, and made everybody feel ill at ease.

"I don't think any one here can be much interested in details," said Mr Brownlow, coldly ; and then he rose to leave the table. It was his habit to leave the table early, and on ordinary occasions his departure made little commotion ; but to-day it was different. They all clustered up to their feet as he went out of the room. Nobody knew what should be done that day. The men looked awkwardly at each other ; the women tried hard to be the same as before, and failed, having Jack before them, who was far from looking the same. "I suppose, Jack, you will not go out to-day," one of his companions said, though they had not an idea why.

"I don't see why I shouldn't," said Jack, and then he made a pause ; and everybody looked at him. "After all," he continued, "you all know your way about ; as Sara has a headache I had better stay ;" and he hurried their departure that he might get rid of them. His father had not gone out ; the dogcart had come to the door, but it had been sent

off again. He was in the library, Willis said in a whisper ; and though he had been so many years with Mr Brownlow and knew all his ways, Willis was obviously startled too. For one moment Jack thought of cross-questioning the butler to see what light he could throw upon the matter—if he had heard anything on the previous night, or suspected anything—but on second thoughts he dismissed the idea. Whatever it was, it was from his father himself that he ought to have the explanation. But though Mr Brownlow was in the library Jack did not go to him there. He loitered about till his friends were gone, and till the ladies of the party, finding him very impracticable and with no amusement in him, had gone off upon their various ways. He did his best to be civil, even playful, poor fellow, being for the moment everybody's representative, both master and mistress of the house. But though there was no absolute deficiency in anything he said or did, they were all too sharp-witted to be taken in. "He has something on his mind," one matron of the party said to the other. "They have something on all their minds, my dear," said the other, solemnly ; and they talked very significantly and mysteriously of the Brownlows as they filled Sara's morning-room with their work and various devices, for it was a foggy, wretched day, and no one cared to venture

out. Jack meanwhile drew a long breath of relief when all his guests were thus off his mind. He stood in the hall and hesitated, and saw Willis watching him from a corner with undisguised anxiety. Perhaps but for that he would have gone to his father; but with everybody watching him, looking on and speculating what it might be, he could not go. And yet something must be done. At last, after he had watched the last man out and the last lady go away, he turned, and went slowly up-stairs to Sara's door.

When his voice was heard there was a little rush within, and Sara came to him. She was very pale, and had the air of a watcher to whom the past night had brought no sleep. It even seemed to Jack that she was in the same dress that she had worn the previous night, though that was a delusion. As soon as she saw that it was her brother, and that he was alone, she sent the maid away, and, taking him by the arm, drew him into the little outer room. There had not been any sentimental fraternity between them in a general way. They were very good friends, and fond of each other, but not given to manifestations of sympathy and devotion. But this time as soon as he was within the door and she had him to herself, Sara threw her arms round Jack, and leant against him, and went off without any warning

into a sudden burst of emotion—not tears exactly. It was rather a struggle against tears. She sobbed and her breast heaved, and she clasped him convulsively. Jack was terribly surprised and shocked, feeling that so unusual an outburst must have a serious cause, and he was very tender with his sister. It did not last more than a minute, but it did more to convince him of the gravity of the crisis than anything else had done. Sara regained command of herself almost immediately and ceased sobbing, and raised her head from his shoulder. “She is there,” she whispered, pointing to the inner room, and then she turned and went before him leading the way. The white curtains of Sara’s bed were drawn at one side, so as to screen the interior of the chamber. Within that enclosure a fire was burning brightly, and seated by it in an easy-chair wrapped in one of Sara’s pretty dressing-gowns, with unaccustomed embroideries and soft frills and ribbons enclosing her brown worn hands and meagre throat, Mrs Preston half sat, half reclined. The firelight was flickering about her, and she lay back and looked at it and at everything around her with a certain dreadful satisfaction. She looked round about upon the room and its comforts as people look on a new purchase. Enjoyment—a certain pleasure of possession—was written on her face.

When she saw Jack she moved a little, and drew the muslin wrapper more closely round her throat with a curious instinct of prudish propriety. It was the same woman to whose society he had accustomed himself as Pamela's mother, and whom he had tutored himself to look upon as a necessary part of his future household, but yet she was a different creature. He did not know her in this new development. He followed Sara into her presence with a new sense of repulsion, a reluctance and dislike which he had never felt before. And Mrs Preston for her part received him with an air which was utterly inexplicable — an air of patronage which made his blood boil.

"I hope you are better," he said, not knowing how to begin; and then, after a pause, "Should not I go and tell Pamela that you are here? or would you like me to take you home?"

"I consider myself at home," said Mrs Preston, sitting up suddenly and bursting into speech. "I will send for Pamela, when it is all settled. I am very thankful to your sister for taking care of me last night. She shall find that it will be to her advantage. Sit down—I am sorry, Mr John, that I cannot say the same for you."

"What is it you cannot say for me?" said Jack: "I don't know in the least what you would be at,

Mrs Preston ; I suppose there must be some explanation of this strange conduct. What does it mean ? ”

“ You will find that it means a great deal,” said the changed woman. “ When you came to me to my poor little place, I did not want to have anything to say to you ; but I never thought of putting any meaning to what you were doing. I was as innocent as a baby—I thought it was all love to my poor child. That was what I thought. And now you’ve stolen her heart away from me, and I know what it was for—I know what it was for.”

“ Then what was it for ? ” said Jack, abruptly. He was by turns red and pale with anger. He found it very hard to keep his temper now that he was personally assailed.

“ It was for this,” cried Pamela’s mother, with a shrill ring in her voice, pointing, as it seemed, to the pretty furniture and pictures round her — “ for all this, and the fine house, and the park, and the money—that was what it was for. You thought you’d marry her and keep it all, and that I should never know what was my rights. But now I do know ; —and you would have killed me last night ! ” she cried wildly, drawing back, with renewed passion — “ you and your father ; you would have killed

me ; I should have been a dead woman by this time if it had not been for her !”

Jack made a hoarse exclamation in his throat as she spoke. The room seemed to be turning round with him. He seemed to be catching glimpses of her meaning through some wild chaos of misunderstanding and darkness. He himself had never wished her ill, not even when she promised to be a burden on him. “Is she mad ?” he said, turning to Sara ; but he felt that she was not mad ; it was something more serious than that.

“I know my rights,” she said, calming down instantaneously. “It’s my house you’ve been living in, and my money that has made you all so fine. You need not start, or pretend as if you didn’t know. It was for that you came and beguiled my Pamela. You might have left me my Pamela ; house, and money, and everything, even down to my poor mother’s blessing,” said Mrs Preston, breaking down pitifully, and falling into a passion of tears. “You have taken them all, you and yours ; but you might have left me my child !”

Jack stood aghast while all this was being poured forth upon him ; but Sara, for her part, fell a-crying too. “She has been saying the same all night,” said Sara ; “what have we to do with her money or her mother’s blessing ? Oh, Jack, what have we to



do with them? What does it mean? I don't understand anything but about Pamela and you."

"Nor I," said Jack, in despair, and he made a little raid through the room in his consternation, that the sight of the two women crying might not make a fool of him; then he came back with the energy of desperation. "Look here, Mrs Preston," he said, "there may be some money question between my father and you—I can't tell; but we have nothing to do with it. I know nothing about it. I think most likely you have been deceived somehow. But, right or wrong, this is not the way to clear it up. Money cannot be claimed in this wild way. Get a lawyer who knows what he is doing to see after it for you; and in the mean time go home like a rational creature. You cannot be permitted to make a disturbance here."

"You shall never have a penny of it," cried Mrs Preston—"not a penny, if you should be starving—nor Pamela either; I will tell her all—that you wanted her for her money; and she will scorn you as I do—you shall have nothing from her or me."

"Answer for yourself," cried Jack, furious, "or be silent. She shall not be brought in. What do I care for your money? Sara, be quiet, and don't cry. She ought never to have been brought here."

"No," cried the old woman, in her passion, "I ought to have been cast out on the roadside, don't you think, to die if I liked? or I ought to have been killed, as you tried last night. That's what you would do to me, while you slept soft and lived high. But my time has come. It's you that must go to the door—the door!—and you need expect no pity from me."

She sat in her feebleness and poverty as on a throne, and defied them, and they stood together bewildered by their ignorance, and did not know what answer to make to her. Though it sounded like madness, it might be true. For anything they could tell, what she was saying might have some foundation unknown to them. Sara by this time had dried her tears, and indignation had begun to take the place of distress in her mind. She gave her brother an appealing look, and clasped her hands. "Jack, answer her—do you know what to say to her?" she cried, stamping her little foot on the ground with impatience; "somebody must know; are we to stand by and hear it all, and do nothing? Jack, answer her!—unless she is mad——"

"I think she must be partly mad," said Jack. "But it must be put a stop to somehow. Go and fetch my father. He is in the library. Whatever

it may be, let us know at least what it means. I will stay with her here."

When she heard these words, the strange inmate of Sara's room came down from her height and relapsed into a feeble old woman. She called Sara not to go, to stay and protect her. She shrank back into her chair, drawing it away into a corner at the furthest distance possible, and sat there watchful and frightened, eyeing Jack as a hunted creature might eye the tiger which might at any moment spring upon it. Jack, for his part, with an exclamation of impatience, turned on his heel and went away from her, as far as space would permit. Impatience began to swallow up every other sentiment in his mind. He could not put up with it any longer. Whatever the truth might be, it was evident that it must be faced and acknowledged at once. While he kept walking about impatient and exasperated, all his respect for Pamela's mother died out of his mind; even, it must be owned, in his excitement, the image of Pamela herself went back into the mists. A certain disgust took possession of him. If it was true that his father had schemed and struggled for the possession of this woman's miserable money—if the threat of claiming it had moved him with some vague but awful temptation, such as Jack shuddered to think of—and if the idea

of having rights and possessing something had changed the mild and humble woman who was Pamela's mother into this frantic and insulting fury, —then what was there worth caring for, what was there left to believe in, in this world? Perhaps even Pamela herself had been changed by this terrible test. Jack did not wish for the wings of a dove, being too matter-of-fact for that. But he felt as if he would like to set out for New Zealand without saying a word to anybody, without breathing a syllable to a single soul on the way. It seemed as if that would be the only thing to do—he himself might get frantic or desperate too like the others about a little money. The backwoods, sheep-shearing, anything would be preferable to that.

This pause lasted for some minutes, for Sara did not immediately return. When she came back, however, a heavier footstep accompanied her up the stair. Mr Brownlow came into the room, and went at once towards the further corner. He had made up his mind; once more he had become perfectly composed, calm as an attorney watching his client's case. He called Jack to him, and went and stood by the table, facing Mrs Preston. "I hear you have sent for me to know the meaning of all this," he said; "I will tell you,

for you have a right to know. Twenty-five years ago, before either of you was born, I had some money left me, which was to be transferred to a woman called Phœbe Thomson, if she could be found out or appeared within twenty-five years. I searched for her everywhere, but I could not find her. Latterly I forgot her existence to a great extent. The five-and-twenty years were out last night, and just before the period ended this—lady—as you both know, appeared. She says she is Phœbe Thomson, the legatee I have told you of. She may be so—I have nothing to say against her; but the proof lies with her, not me. This is all the explanation there is to make.”

When he had said it he drew a long breath of relief. It was the truth. It was not perhaps all the truth; but he had told the secret, which had weighed him down for months, and the burden was off his heart. He felt a little sick and giddy as he stood there before his children. He did not look them in the face. In his heart he knew there were many more particulars to tell. But it was not for them to judge of his heart. “I have told you the secret, so far as there is a secret,” he said, with a faint smile at them, and then sat down suddenly, exhausted with the effort. It was not so difficult after all. Now that it was done, a faint wonder

crossed his mind that he had not done it long ago, and saved himself all this trouble. But still he was glad to sit down. Somehow, it took the strength out of him as few things had done before.

"A legatee!" burst forth Sara in amazement, not understanding the word. "Is that all? Papa, she says the house is hers, and everything is hers. She says we have no right here. Is it true?"

As for Jack, he looked his father steadily in the face, asking, Was it true? more imperiously than Sara's words did. If this were all, what was the meaning of the almost tragedy last night? They forgot the very existence of the woman who was the cause of it all as they turned upon him. Poverty and wealth were small matters in comparison. He was on his trial at an awful tribunal, before judges too much alarmed, too deeply interested, to be lenient. They turned their backs upon Mrs Preston, who, notwithstanding her fear and anxiety, could not bear the neglect. Their disregard of her roused her out of her own self-confidence and certainty, to listen with a certain forlorn eagerness. She had not paid much attention to what Mr Brownlow said the first time. What did it matter what he said? Did not she know better? But when Jack and Sara turned their backs on her, and fixed their eyes

on their father, she woke up with an intense mortification and disappointment at finding herself overlooked, and began to listen too.

Mr Brownlow rose up as a man naturally does who has to plead guilty or not guilty for his life. He stood before them, putting his hand on the table to support himself. "It is not true," he said. "I do not deny that I have been thinking a great deal about this. If I had but known, I should have told you; but these are the real facts. If she is Phœbe Thomson, as she says—though of that we have no proof—she is entitled to fifty thousand pounds which her mother left her. That is the whole. To pay her her legacy may force me to leave this house, and change our mode of living; but she has nothing to do with the house—nothing here is hers, absolutely nothing. She has no more to do with Brownlows than your baker has, or your dressmaker. If she is Phœbe Thomson, I shall owe her money—nothing more. I might have told you, if I had but known."

What Mr Brownlow meant was, that he would have told them had he known, after all, how little it would cost to tell it. After all, there was nothing disgraceful in the tale, notwithstanding the terrible shifts to which he had put himself to conceal it. He had spoken it out, and now his mind was free.

If he had but known what a relief it would be! But he sat down as soon as he had finished speaking; and he did not feel as if he could pay much attention to anything else. His mind was in a state of confusion about what had happened the previous night. It seemed to him that he had said or done something he ought not to have done or said. But now he had made his supreme disclosure, and given up the struggle. It did not much matter what occurred beside.

Mrs Preston, however, who had been listening eagerly, and whom nobody regarded for the moment, rose up and made a step forward among them. "He may deny it," she said, trembling; "but I know he's known it all this time, and kept us out of our rights. Fifty pound—fifty thousand pound—what does he say? I know better. It is all mine, every penny, and he's been keeping us out of our rights. You've been all fed and nourished on what was mine—your horses and your carriages, and all your grandeur; and he says it's but fifty pounds! Don't you remember that there's One that protects the fatherless?" she cried out, almost screaming. The very sight of his composure made her wild and desperate. "You make no account of me," she cried—"no more than if I was the dust under your feet, and I'm the mistress of all—of all; and



if it had not been for her you would have killed me last night."

These words penetrated even Mr Brownlow's stupor; he gave a shudder as if with the cold. "I was very hard driven last night," he said, as if to himself—"very hard put to it. I don't know what I may have said." Then he made a pause, and rose, and went to his enemy, who fell back into the chair, and took fright as he approached her, putting out her two feeble hands to defend herself. "If you are Phœbe Thomson," he said, "you shall have your rights. I know nothing about you—I never thought of you. This house is mine, and you have nothing to do here. All you have any right to is your money, and you shall have your money when you prove your identity. But I cannot leave you here to distress my child. If you are able to think at all, you must see that you ought to go home. Send for the carriage to take her home," Mr Brownlow added, turning to his children. "If she is the person she calls herself, she is a relation of your mother's; and anyhow, she is weak and old. Take care of her. Sara, my darling, you are not to stay here with her, nor let her vex you; but I leave her in your hands."

"I will do what you tell me, papa," said Sara; and then he stood for a moment and looked at them

wistfully. They had forsaken him last night; both of them—or at least so he fancied—had gone over to the enemy; and that had cut him to the heart. Now he turned to them wistfully, looking for a little support and comfort. It would not be so hard after all if his children went with him into captivity. They had both been so startled and excited that but for this look, and the lingering, expectant pause he made, neither would have thought of their father's feelings. But it was impossible to misunderstand him now. Sara, in her impulsive way, went up to him and put her arms round his neck. "Papa, it is we who have been hard upon you," she said; and as for Jack, who could not show his feelings by an embrace, he also made a kind of *amende* in an ungracious masculine way. He said, "I'm coming with you, sir. I'll see after the carriage," and marched off behind his father to the door. Neither of them took any further notice of Mrs Preston. It seemed to her as if they did not care. They were not afraid of her; they did not come obsequiously to her feet, as she had thought they would. On the contrary, they were banding together among themselves against her, making a league among themselves, taking no notice of her. And her own child was not there to comfort her heart. It was a great shock and

downfall to the unhappy woman. She had been a good woman so long as she was untempted. But it had seemed to her, in the wonderful prospect of a great fortune, that everybody would fall at her feet; that she would be able to do what she pleased—to deal with all her surroundings as she pleased. When she saw she could not do so, her mind grew confused—fifty pound, fifty thousand pound, which was it? And she was alone, and they were all banding themselves against her. Money seemed nothing in comparison to the elevation, the supremacy she had dreamed of. And they did not even take the trouble to look at her as they went away!

## CHAPTER XXXVIII.

### MOTHER AND LOVER.

JACK followed his father down-stairs, and did not say a word. It had been an exciting morning; and now that he knew all, though the excitement had not as yet begun to flag, care came along with it. Suspense and mystery were hard, and yet at the same time easier to bear than reality. The calamity might have loomed larger while it was unknown, but at least it was unaccompanied by those real details from which there is no escape. When Mr Brownlow and his son reached the bottom of the stair, they stopped, and turned, and looked at each other. A certain shade of apology was in Mr Brownlow's tone. "I thought it was all over last night," he said; "I thought you were all safe. You know my meaning now."

"Safe, sir, safe!" said Jack, "with this always hanging over our heads? I don't understand why

we were not allowed to know ; but never mind. I am glad it has come, and there is nothing more to look for. It bears interest, I suppose."

"That must be a matter of arrangement. I suppose it does," said Mr Brownlow, with a sigh.

Jack gave vent to his feelings in a low, faint, prolonged whistle. "I'll go and tell them about the carriage," he said. This was all the communication that passed between the father and the son ; but it was enough to show Mr Brownlow that Jack was not thinking, as he might very naturally have thought, of his new position as the future son-in-law of the woman who had wrought so much harm. Jack's demeanour, though he did not say a word of sympathy to his father, was quite the contrary of this. He did not make any professions, but he took up the common family burden upon his shoulders. The fifty thousand pounds was comparatively little. It was a sum which could be measured and come to an end of ; but the interest, that was the dreadful thought. Jack was practical, and his mind jumped at it on the moment. It was as a dark shadow which had come over him, and which he could not shake off. Brownlaws was none of hers, and yet she might not be wrong after all in thinking that all was hers. The actual claim was heavy enough, but the possible claim was overwhelming. It seemed to Jack to go

into the future and overshadow that as it overshadowed the present. No wonder Mr Brownlow had been in despair—no wonder almost—— the young man gave a very heavy sigh as he went into the stable-yard and gave his instructions. He stood and brooded over it with his brow knitted and his hands buried in his pockets, while the horses were put into the carriage. As for such luxuries, they counted for nothing, or at least so he thought for the moment—nothing to *him*; but a burden that would lie upon them for years—a shadow of debt and difficulty projected into the future,—that seemed more than any man could bear.

It will be seen from this that the idea of his own relations with Pamela making any difference in the matter had not crossed Jack's mind. He would have been angry had any one suggested it. Not that he thought of giving up Pamela; but in the mean time the idea of having anything to do with Mrs Preston was horrible to him, and he was not a young man who was always reasonable and sensible, and took everything into consideration, any more than the rest of us. To tell the truth, he had no room in his thoughts for the idea of marriage or of Pamela at that moment. He strode round to the hall door as the coachman got on the box, and went up to Sara's room without stopping to think. "The carriage is

here," he said, calling to Sara at the door. He would have taken the intruder down-stairs, and put her into it as courteously as if she had been a duchess; for, as we have already said, there was a certain fine natural politeness in the Brownlow blood. But when he heard the excited old woman still raving about her rights, and that they wanted to kill her, the young man became impatient. He was weary of her; and when she fell into threats of what she would do, disgust mingled with his impatience. Then all at once, while he waited, a sudden thought struck him. Poor little Pamela! what could she be thinking all this time? How would she feel when she heard that her mother had become their active enemy? In a moment there flitted before Jack, as he stood at the door, a sudden vision of the little uplifted face, pale as it had grown of late, with the wistful eyes wide open, and the red lips apart, and the pretty rings of hair clustering about the forehead. What would Pamela think when she knew? What was to be done, now that this division, worse than any unkind sentence of a rich father, had come between them? It was no fault of hers, no fault of his; fate had come between them in the wildest, unlooked-for way. And should they have to yield to it? The thought gave Jack such a sudden twinge in his own heart, that it roused him altogether out

of his preoccupation. It roused him to that fine self-regard which is so natural, and which is reckoned a virtue nowadays. What did it matter about an old mother? Such people had had their day, and had no right to control the young, whose day was still to come. Pamela's future and Jack's future were of more importance than anything that could happen at the end, as it were, of Mrs Preston's life, or even of Mr Brownlow's life.

This was the consideration that woke Jack up out of the strange maze he had fallen into on the subject of his own concerns. He turned on his heel all at once, and left Mrs Preston arguing the matter with Sara, and went off down the avenue almost as rapidly as his own mare could have done it. No, by Jove! he was not going to give up. Mrs Preston might eat her money if she liked—might ruin Brownlows if she liked; but she should not interfere between him and his love. And Jack felt that there was no time to lose, and that Pamela must know how matters stood, and what he expected of her, before her mother went back to poison her mind against him. He took no time to knock even at the door of Mrs Swayne's cottage, but went in and took possession like an invading army. Probably, if he had been a young man of very delicate and susceptible mind, he very knowledge that Pamela might now be con-



sidered an heiress, and himself a poor man, would have closed up the way to him, and turned his steps for ever from the door. But Jack was not of that fine order of humanity. He was a young man who liked his own way, and was determined not to be unhappy if he could help it, and held tenaciously by everything that belonged to him. Such matter-of-fact natures are seldom moved by the sentimentalisms of self-sacrifice. He had not the smallest idea of sacrificing himself, if the truth must be told. He strode along, rushing like the wind, and went straight in at Mrs Swayne's door. Nobody interrupted his passage, or stood in his way; nobody even saw him but old Betty, who came out to her door to see who had passed so quickly, and shook her head over him. "He goes there a deal more than is good for him," Betty said, and then, as it was cold, shut the door.

Pamela had been sitting in the dingy parlour all alone; and, to tell the truth, she had been crying a little. She did not know where her mother was; she did not know when she was coming back. No message had reached her, nor letter, nor any sign of life, and she was frightened and very solitary. Jack, too, since he knew she was alone and could be seen at any hour, did not make so many anxious pilgrimages as he had done when Mrs Preston was ill and the

road was barred against him. She had no one to tell her fears to, no one to encourage and support her, and the poor child had broken down dreadfully. She was sitting at the window trying to read one of Mrs Swayne's books, trying not to ask herself who it was that came so late to Brownlows last night? what was her mother doing? what was Jack doing? The book, as may be supposed, had small chance against all these anxieties. It had dropped upon the table before her, and her innocent tears had been dropping on it, when a sudden shadow flitted past the window, and a footstep rang on the steps, and Jack was in the room. The sight of him changed wonderfully the character of Pamela's tears, but yet it increased her agitation. Nobody in her small circle except herself had any faith in him; and she knew that, at this present moment, he ought not to come.

"No, I am not sorry to see you," she said, in answer to his accusation, "I am glad; but you should not come. Mamma is away. I am all alone."


"You have the more need of me," said Jack. "But listen, Pamela. Your mother is not away. She is here at Brownlows. She is coming directly. I rushed off to see you before she arrived. I must speak to you first. Remember you are mine—whatever happens, you are mine, and you cannot forsake me."

"Forsake you?" cried Pamela, in pitiful accents. "Is it likely? If there is any forsaking, it will be you. You know—oh, you know you have not much to fear."

"I have everything to fear," said Jack, speaking very fast; your mother is breathing fire and flame against us all. She is coming back our enemy. She will tell you I have had a mercenary meaning from the beginning, and she will order you to give me up. But don't do it, Pamela. I am not the sort of man to be given up. We were going to be poor, and marry against my father's will; now we shall be poor, and marry against your mother's—that is all the difference. You have chosen me, and you must give her up and not me. That is all I have to say."

"Give up mamma?" cried Pamela, in amazement. "I don't know what you mean. You promised I was to have her with me, and take care of her always. She would die without me. Oh Jack, why have you changed so soon?"

"It is not I that have changed," said Jack; "everything has changed. This is what it will come to. It will be to give up her or me. I don't say I will die without you," said the young man—"no such luck; but—— Look here, Pamela, this is what it will come to. You will have to choose between her and me."



"Oh no, no!" cried Pamela; "no! don't say so. I am not the one to choose. Don't turn away from me! don't look so pale and dreadful! it is not me to choose."

"But it is you, by heavens!" cried Jack, in desperation. "Here she is coming! It is not your old mother who was to live with us—it is a different woman—here she is. Is it to be her or me?"

"Oh, Jack!" Pamela cried, thinking he was mad; and she submitted to his fierce embrace in utter bewilderment, not knowing what to imagine. To see the Brownlows carriage dash down the avenue and wheel round at the door and open to let Mrs Preston forth was as great a wonder as if the earth had opened. She could not tell what was going to happen. It was a relief to her to be held fast and kept back—her consternation took her strength from her. She was actually unable to follow her first impulse and rush to the door.

Mrs Preston came in by herself, quiet but tremulous. Her head shook a little, but there was no sign of weakness about her now. She had been defeated, but she had got over the bitterness of her defeat, and was prepared for a struggle. Jack felt the difference when he looked at her. He had been contemptuous of her weak passion and repetition about her rights; but he saw the change in a moment, and he met her,

standing up, holding Pamela fast, with his arm round her. Mrs Preston had carried the war into her enemy's camp, and gone to his house to demand, as she thought, everything he had in the world. These were Jack's reprisals—he came to her citadel and claimed everything *she* had in the world. It was his, and, more than that, it was already given to him—his claim was allowed.

“You are here!” cried Mrs Preston, passionately. “I thought you would be here! you have come before me to steal her from me. I knew how it would be!”

“I have come to claim what is mine,” said Jack, “before you interfere. I know you will try to step between us; but you are not to step between us—do what you like, she is mine.”

“Pamela,” said Mrs Preston, still, notwithstanding her late defeat, believing somehow strangely in the potency of the new fortune for which she felt everybody should fall at her feet, “things have changed. Stand away from him, and listen to me. We're rich now—we shall have everything that heart ever desired; there is not a thing you can think of but what I can give it you. You've thought I was hard upon you, dear, but it was all for your sake. What do I care for money, but for your sake?—Everything you can think of, Pamela—it will be like a fairy tale.”

Pamela stood still for one moment, looking at her mother and her lover. She had disengaged herself from him, and stood, unrestrained, to make her election. "If it is so, mamma," she said—"I don't know what you mean—you know I don't understand; but if it is, there's no more difficulty. It does not matter so much whether Mr Brownlow consents or not."

"Mr Brownlow!" cried her mother; "Mr Brownlow has been your enemy, child, since long before you were born. He has taken your money to bring up his own fine lady upon. He has sent his son here when he can't do any better, to marry you and keep the money. Sir, go away from my child. It's your money he wants; your money, not you."

Pamela turned round with surprise and terror in her face, and looked at Jack; then she smiled softly and shook her head. "Mamma, you are mistaken," she said, in her soft little voice, and held out her hand to him. Mrs Preston threw up her arms above her head wildly, and gave an exceeding bitter cry.

"I am her mother," she cried out, "her own mother, that have nursed her and watched over her, and given up everything to her; and she chooses him rather than me; him that she has not known a year—that wants her for her money, or for her pretty face. She chooses him before me!"

She stood up alone, calling upon heaven and earth,

as it were, to see ; while the two clung together dismayed and pitiful, yet holding fast by each other still. It was the everlasting struggle so continually repeated ; the past against the present and the future—the old love against the new—and not any question of worldly interest. It was the tragic figure of disappointment and desolation and age in face of hope and love and joy. What she had been doing was poor and mean enough. She had been intoxicated by the vision of sudden wealth, and had expected everybody to be abject before her ; but now a deeper element had come in. She forgot the fortune, the money, though it was still on her lips, and cried out, in the depth of her despair, over the loss of the only real wealth she had in the world. No tears came to her old eyes—her old meagre arms rose rigid, yet trembling. “She chooses him before me!” she said, with a cry of despair, which came from the bottom of her heart.

“Mamma,” cried poor little Pamela, tearing her hand from that of her lover, and coming doubtfully into the midst between the two, “I don’t choose ! oh, mamma, how can I choose ? I never was away from you in my life—he promised we never were to be parted. How am I to give him up ? Oh, why, why should you ask me to give him up ?” cried the poor child. Floods of tears came to her aid. She put her

pretty hands together like a child at prayer—every line in her sweet face was in itself a supplication. Jack, behind her, stood and watched and said nothing. Perhaps he saw, notwithstanding, that it was against his interests—and in his heart had a certain mournful pity for the despair in the old woman's terrible face.

"But I expect you to choose," she said, wildly; "things have come to that. It must be him or me—him or me; there's no midway between us. I am your old mother, your poor old mother, that would pluck my heart out of my breast to give it you. I've survived them all, and done without them all, and lived for your sake. And he is a young man that was taken with your pretty face—say it was your pretty face—say the best that can be said. If you were like death—if you lost all your beauty and your pretty ways—if you were ugly and ailing and miserable,—it would be all the same to me; I would love you all the more—all the more; and he—he would never look at you again. That's nature. I require you to choose. It must be him or me!"

As she stood listening, a change came over Pamela's face. Her first appeal to her mother had been full of emotion, but of a gentle, hopeful, almost superficial kind. She had taken tears to her aid and pleading looks, and believed in their success now as



always. But as Mrs Preston spoke, Pamela's little innocent soul was shaken as by an earthquake. She woke up and opened her eyes, and found that she was in a world new to her—a world no longer of prayers, and tears, and sweet yielding, and tender affection. It was not tender affection she had to do with now; it was fierce love, desperate and ruthless, ready to tear her asunder. Her tears dried up, her pretty cheeks grew pale as death, she looked from one to the other with a wild look of wonder, asking if it was true. When her mother's voice ceased, it seemed to Pamela that the world stood still for the moment, and everything in heaven and earth held its breath. She looked at Jack; he stood motionless, with his face clouded over, and made no answer to her pitiful appeal. She looked at Mrs Preston, and saw her mother's eager face hollow and excited, her eyes blazing, her cheeks burning with a strange hectic heat. For one moment she stood irresolute. Then she made one tottering step to her mother's side, and turned round and looked at her lover. Once more she clasped her hands, though she had no longer any hope in pleading. "I must stay here," she said, with a long-drawn sobbing sigh—"I must stay here, if I should die."

They stood thus and looked at each other for one of those moments which is as long as an age. The

mother would have taken her child to her arms, but Pamela would not. "Not now, not now!" she said, putting back the embrace. Jack, for his part, stood and watched with an intensity of perception he had never exercised before. The struggle had ascended into a higher region of passion than he knew of. He turned and went to the door, with the intention, so far as he had any intention, of retiring for the moment from the contest. Then he came back again. Whatever the pressure on him might be, he could not leave Pamela so.

"Look here," he said, abruptly; "I am going away. But if you think I accept this as a choice or decision, you are much mistaken. You force her to give in to you, and then you think I am to accept it! I'll do no such thing. She could not say anything else, or do anything else—but all the same, she is mine. You can't touch that, do what you like. Pamela, darling, don't lose heart; it's only for a little while."

He did not stop to listen to what her mother said; he turned at once and went out, unconsciously, in his excitement, thrusting Mrs Swayne out of his way, who was in the passage. He went off up the avenue at a stretch without ever drawing breath. A hundred wild thoughts rose in his mind; her mother! what was her mother to him? He was ready to vow with Hamlet, that twenty thousand mothers could

not have filled up his sum of love ; and yet he was not blaming his Pamela. She could not have done otherwise. Why had he never been told ? why had not he known that this downfall was hanging over him ? Why had he been such a fool as to give in at all to the sweet temptation ? Now, of course, when things had come this length, he would as soon have cut his own throat as given Pamela up. And what with love and rage, and the sudden calamity, and the gradual exasperation, he was beside himself, and did not well know what he was about. He was almost too much absorbed in his own affairs to be able to understand Sara, who came to him as he entered the house, and drew him aside into the dining-room to speak to him. Sara was pale enough to justify her pretext of headache, but otherwise she was full of energy and spirit, and met the emergency with a courageous heart.

"We must face it out as well as we can, Jack," she said, with her eyes shining out large and full from her white face. "We must keep up before all these people. They must not be able to go away and say that something went terribly wrong at Brownlows. We must keep it up to the last."

"Pshaw ! what does it matter what they think or what they say ?" said Jack, sitting down with a sigh of weariness. As for Sara, who was not tired, nor

had any personal complication to bow her down, she blazed up at his indifference.

"It matters everything!" she cried. "We may not be a county family any more, nor fine people, but we are always the Brownlaws of Masterton. Nobody must have a word to say about it—for papa's sake."

"Everybody will soon be at liberty to say what they please about it," said Jack. "Where is he? I had better go and talk to him, I suppose?"

"Papa is in the library," said Sara. "Jack, he wants our support. He wants us to stand by him—or, I mean, he wants you; as for me," she continued, with a flash of mingled softness and defiance, "he knows *I* would not forsake him; he wants you."

"Why shouldn't you forsake him?" said Jack, with a momentary growl; "and why should he be doubtful of me?"

But he did not wait for any answer. He took the decanter of sherry from the sideboard, and swallowed he did not know how much; and then he went off to the library to seek out his father. There was a certain stealthiness about the house—a feeling that the people belonging to it were having interviews in corners, that they were consulting each other, making solemn decisions, and that their guests were much in

the way. Though Sara rushed away immediately to the room where her friends were, after waylaying her brother, her appearance did not alter the strong sense everybody had of the state of affairs. The very servants slunk out of Jack's way, and stood aside in corners to watch him going into the library. He called the footman out of his hiding-place as he passed, and swore at him for an impertinent fool. The man had been doing nothing that was impertinent, and yet he did not feel that there was injustice in the accusation. Something very serious had happened, and the consciousness of it had gone all through the house.

Mr Brownlow was sitting in the library doing nothing. That, at least, was his visible aspect. Within himself he had been calculating and reckoning up till his wearied brain whirled with the effort. He sat leaning his arms on the table and his head in his hands. By this time his powers of thought had failed him. He sat looking on, as it were, and saw the castle of his prosperity crumbling down into dust before him. Everything he had ever aimed at seemed to drop from him. He had no longer anything to conceal; but he knew that he had stood at the bar before his children, and had been pardoned but not justified. They would stand by him, but they did not approve him; and they

had seen the veil of his heart lifted, and had looked in and found darker things there than he himself had ever been conscious of. He was so absorbed in this painful maze of thought that he did not even look up when Jack came in. Of course Jack would come; he knew that. Jack was ruined; they were all ruined. All for the advantage of a miserable woman who would get no comfort out of her inheritance, whose very life was hanging on a thread. It seemed hard to him that Providence, which had always been so kind to him, should permit it. When his son came in and drew a chair to the other side of the table he roused himself. "Is it you, Jack?" he said; "I am so tired that I fear I am stupid. I was very hard driven last night."

"Yes," said Jack, with a little shudder; and Mr Brownlow looked at him, and their eyes met, and they knew what each had meant. It was a hard moment for the father who had been mad, and had come to his senses again, but yet did not know what horrible suspicion it was under which for a moment he had lain.

"I was hard driven," he repeated, pathetically—"very hard put to it. I had been standing out for a long time, and then in a moment I broke down. But I shall be able to talk it all over with you—by-and-by."

"That was what I came for, sir," said Jack. "We must know what we are to do."

And then Mr Brownlow put down his supporting hands from his head, and steadied himself in a wearied wondering way. Jack for the moment had the authority on his side.

## CHAPTER XXXIX.

### COMPOUND INTEREST.

MR BROWNLOW and his son were a long time together. They talked until the autumn day darkened, and they had no more light for their calculations. Mr Brownlow had been very weary,—even stupefied. He had entered upon the conversation because he could not resist Jack's eagerness, and the decided claim he made to know fully a business which so much concerned him. He had a right to know, which his father could not dispute ; but nevertheless all the events of the past twenty-four hours had worn Mr Brownlow out. He was stupefied ; he did not know what had happened ; he could not recollect the details. When his attention was fully arrested, a certain habit of business kept him on, and his mind was clear enough when they went into figures, and when he had to make his son aware of the magnitude of the misfortune which had almost



thrown his own mind off its balance. The facts were beyond all comment. It was simple ruin; but such was the nature of the men and their agreement in it, that they both worked out their reckoning unflinchingly, and when they saw what it was, did not so much as utter an exclamation. They laid down, the one his pen and the other his pencil as the twilight darkness found them. There was no controversy between them. It was nobody's fault. Jack might have aimed a sting at everything by reproaching his father for the ignorance in which he had been brought up, but he had no mind for any such useless expostulation. Things were as bad as bad could be; therefore they brought their calculations to an end very quickly, and came to the same conclusion as the darkness closed over them. They sat for a minute on opposite sides of the table, not looking at each other, with their papers before them, and their minds filled with one sombre thought. Whether it was that or the mere fall of day which was closing round them neither could have told—only that under this dull oppression there was in Jack's mind a certain wild suppressed impatience, an overwhelming sense of all that was included in the crisis; while his father in the midst of it could not repress a strange longing to throw himself down upon the sofa, to close his eyes, to be alone in the silence and dark-

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very decided on the subject last time you spoke to me. In that case everything would be yours."

"I hope she may live for ever!" said Jack, getting up from his chair; "and she has no intention of giving me her daughter now—not that her intention matters much," he said to himself, half muttering, as he stood with his hand on the table. The change was bewildering. He would have his Pamela still, whatever anybody might say; but to run away with his pretty penniless darling, and work for her and defy the world for her, was very different from running away with the little heiress who had a right to every penny he had supposed his own. It was very hard upon him; but all the same he had no intention of giving in. No idea of self-sacrifice ever crossed his mind. It made the whole matter more confusing, more disagreeable—but anybody's intention mattered very little, father or mother; he meant to have his love and his way all the same.

"It does matter," said Mr Brownlow. "It had much better never go into Chancery at all. I never had any objections to the girl—you need not be impatient. I always liked the girl. She is like your mother. I never knew what it was——" Then Mr Brownlow made a little pause. "Poor Bessie!" he said, though it was an exclamation that did not

seem called for. It was this fortune that had first made him think of Bessie. It was for her sake—for the sake of making a very foolish marriage—that he had made use of the money which at first was nothing but a plague and burden to him. Somehow she seemed to come up before him now it was melting away, and he knew that the charm of Pamela's dewy eyes and fresh face had been their resemblance to Bessie. The thought softened his heart, and yet made it sting and ache. "This matter is too important for temper or pride," he went on, recovering himself. "If we are to treat as enemies, of course I must resist, and it will be a long suit, and perhaps outlive us all. But if you are to be her daughter's husband, the question is different. You are the natural negotiator between us."

"I can't be; it is impossible," cried Jack; and then he sat down again in his chair in a sort of sullen fury with himself. Of course he was the natural negotiator. It was weakness itself to think of flinching from so plain a duty; and yet he would rather have faced a battery or led a forlorn hope.

"You must be," said Mr Brownlow. "We are all excited at this present moment; but there can be no doubt of what your position entails. You are my son, and you are, against my will, contrary to my

advice, engaged to her daughter. Unless you mean to throw off the girl you love because she has suddenly become an heiress——”

“I mean nothing of the sort,” cried Jack, angrily. “I shall never throw her off.”

“Then you can’t help having an interest in her fortune;—and doing the best you can for her,” said his father, after a pause.

Then again silence fell upon the two. It was natural and reasonable, but it was utterly repugnant, even though one of them thus urged it, to both. A thing may be recommended by good sense, and by all the force of personal interest, and yet may be more detestable than if it was alike foolish and wicked. This was how it seemed to Jack; and for Mr Brownlow, in the whirl of ruin which had sucked him in, it was as yet but a poor consolation that his son might get the benefit. Acting by the dictates of nature he would rather have kept his son at his side to share his fortune and stand by him. Yet it was his duty to advise Jack to go over to the other side and take everything he had from him, and negotiate the transfer of his fortune—to “do the best he could,” in short, for his father’s adversary. It was not an expedient agreeable to either, and yet it was a thing which reason and common sense demanded should be done.

While they sat thus gloomily together, the household went on in a strangely uncomfortable way outside. The men came straggling in from their shooting, or whatever they had been doing; and, though Sara was with the ladies, everybody knew by instinct, as it seemed, that her father and brother were consulting together over something very serious, shut up in the library, Mr Brownlow neglecting his business and Jack his pleasure. If it had only been business that was neglected, nobody would have been surprised; but when things were thus pushed beyond that natural regard for appearances which is born with Englishmen, they must be serious indeed. Then, of course, to make matters worse, the gentlemen came in earlier than usual. It was their curiosity, the elder ladies said to each other, for everybody knows that it is men who are the true gossips and ferret everything out; but, however that might be, it threw additional embarrassment upon Sara, who stood bravely at her post—a little flushed, perhaps, and unnaturally gay, but holding out with dauntless courage. She had everything to take on her own shoulders. That night, as it happened by unlucky chance, there was to be a dinner-party. Sir Charles Motherwell and his mother were coming, and were to stay all night; and the Rector was coming, he who knew the house better than any-

body else, and would be most quick of all to discover the difference in it. The recollection of the gathering in the evening had gone out of Mr Brownlow's mind, and even Jack had forgotten all about it. "Like men!" Sara said to herself, indignantly. She had everything to do, though she had not slept all night, and had not escaped her share of the excitement of the day. She had to give all the orders and make all the arrangements, and now sat dauntless pouring out the tea, keeping everybody at bay, acknowledging the importance of the crisis only by unusual depth of colour on her cheek, and an unusual translucent sheen in her big eyes. They did not flash or sparkle as other eyes might have done, but shone like globes full of some weird and visionary light. She had an answer ready for everybody, and yet all the while she was racking her mind to think what could they be doing down-stairs, what decision could they be coming to? She was doing her part stoutly in ignorance and patience, spreading her pretty draperies before them, as it were, and keeping the world at arm's length. "Oh, yes, the Motherwells are coming," she said, "but they will come dressed for dinner, which none of us are as yet. They are only at Ridley—they have not very far to come. Yes, I think we had better have a dance. Jack is not good for much in that way. He

never was. He was always an out-of-doors sort of boy."

"He does not seem to care for out-of-doors either," said one of the young ladies; "and, Sara, I wonder what has happened to him. He always looks as if he were thinking of something else."

"Something else than—what?" said Sara. "He has something else than us to think of—if that is what you mean. He is not one of your idle people——" which speech was met by a burst of laughter.

"Oh no; he is very diligent; he loves business," said young Keppel. "We are all aware of that."

"He is not at the bar, you know," retorted the dauntless Sara. "He has not briefs pouring in upon him like—some people. But it is very good of you to take so much notice of us between the circuits—is that the right word? And to reward you, you shall manage the dance. Does Sir Charles dance? I suppose so—all common people do."

"Sara, my love, don't speak so," said one of the matrons. "The Motherwells are one of the best families in the country. I don't know what you mean by common people."

"I mean people who are just like other people," said Sara, "as we all are. If we did not wear different-coloured dresses and have different-coloured hair and eyes, I don't see how we could be told from



each other. As for gentlemen generally, you *know* one never knows which is which!" she cried, appealing to the candour of her friends. "We pretend to do it to please them. Half of them have light beards and half of them have dark, and one never gets any further; except with those whom one has the honour to know," said Sara, rising and making a curtsy to the young men who were round her. Then, amid laughter and remonstrances they all went fluttering away—too early, as most of the young people thought—to their rooms to dress. And some of them thought Sara "really too bad;" and some were sure the gentlemen did not like it. The gentlemen, however, did not seem to mind. They said to each other, "By Jove! how pretty she was to-night!" and some of them wondered how much money she would have; and some supposed she would marry Charley Motherwell after all. And, for the moment, what with dinner approaching and the prospect of the dance after, both the ladies and the men forgot to wonder what could be the matter with the family, and what Mr Brownlow was saying to Jack.

But as for Sara, she did not forget. Though she was first to move, she was still in the drawing-room when they all went away, and came pitifully up to the big fire which sent gleams of light about

through all the dark room, and knelt down on the hearth and warmed her hands, and shivered, not with cold, but excitement. Her eyes were big and nervous and dilated ; but though her tears came easily enough on ordinary occasions, to-night she did not cry. She knelt before the fire and held out her hands to it, and then wrung them hard together, wondering how she should ever be able to go through the evening, and what they were doing down-stairs, and whether she should not go and remind them of the dinner. It seemed to her as if for the moment she had got rid of her enemies, and had time to think ; but she was too restless to think, and every moment seemed an hour to her. As soon as the steps and voices of the guests became inaudible on the stairs, she got up and went down to seek them out in the library. There were two or three servants in the hall, more than had any right to be there, and Willis, who was standing at the foot of the stairs, came up to her in a doubtful, hesitating way. A gentleman had come up from the office, he said ; but he did not like to disturb Master, as was a-talking with Mr John in the library. The gentleman was in the dining-room. Would Miss Sara see him, or was her papa to be told ? Sara was so much excited already, that she saw in this visitor only some new trouble, and

jumped at the idea of meeting it herself, and perhaps saving her father something. "I will see him," she said; and she called up all her resolution, and went rapidly, with the haste of desperation, into the dining-room. The door had closed behind her, and she glided past the long, brilliant, flower-decked table to where somebody was standing by the fireplace ere she really thought what she was doing. When the stranger started and spoke, Sara woke up as from a dream; and when she found it was Powys who was looking at her—looking anxious, wistful, tender, not like the other people—the poor girl's composure failed her. She gave him one glance, and then all the tears that had been gathering in her eyes suddenly burst forth. "Oh, Mr Powys, tell me what it is all about!" she cried, holding out her hands to him. And he, not knowing what he was doing, not thinking of himself or of his love, only penetrated to the heart by her tears, sprang forward and took her into his arms and comforted her. There was one moment in which neither of them knew. For that brief instant they clung to each other unwitting, and then they fell apart, and stood and looked at each other, and trembled; not knowing in their confusion and consciousness and trouble what to say.

"Don't be angry with me!" he cried; "I did not

know what I was doing—I did not mean—forgive me!—you were crying, and I could not bear it; how could I stand still and see you cry?”

“I am not angry,” said Sara, softly. Never in her life had she spoken so softly before. “I know you did not mean it; I am in such terrible trouble; and they never told me it was you.”

Then Powys crept closer once more, poor young fellow, knowing he ought not, but too far gone for reason. “But it *is* I,” he said, softly touching the hand with which she leaned on the mantelpiece,—“to serve you—to do anything—anything! only tell me what there is that I can do?”

Then she looked up with her big lucid eyes, and two big tears in them, and smiled at him though her heart felt like to burst, and put out her hands again, knowing this time what she was doing; and he took them, half-crazed with the joy and the wickedness. “I came up with some papers,” he said; “I came against my will; I never thought, I never hoped to see you; and your father will think I have done it dishonourably on purpose; tell me, oh, tell me, what I can do.”

“I don’t think you can do anything,” said Sara, “nor anybody else. I should not speak to you, but I can’t help it. We are in great trouble. And then you are the only one I could speak to,” said the girl,

with unconscious self-betrayal. "I think we have lost everything we have in the world."

"Lost everything!" said Powys; his eyes began to dance, and his cheek to burn—"lost everything!" It was he now who trembled with eagerness, and surprise, and joy. "I don't want to be glad," he cried, "but I could work for you, slave for you—I shouldn't mind what I did——"

"Oh, hush!" cried Sara, interrupting him, "I think I hear papa: it might not matter for us, but it is him we ought to think of. We have got people coming, and I don't know what to do—I must go to papa."

Then the young man stood and looked at her wistfully. "I can't help you with that," he said, "I can't be any good to you—the only thing I can do is to go away; but, Sara! you have only to tell me; you know——"

"Yes," she said, lifting her eyes to him once more, and the two big tears fell, and her lips quivered as she tried to smile; she was not angry—"yes," she said, "I know;" and then there were sounds outside, and in a moment this strange, wild, sweet surprise was over. Sara rushed out to the library without another word, and Powys, tingling to the very points of his fingers, gave his bundle of papers to Willis to be given to Mr Brownlow, and

said he would come back, and rushed out into the glare of Lady Motherwell's lamps as her carriage came sweeping up the avenue. He did not know who the little old lady was, nor who the tall figure with the black mustache might be in the corner of the carriage; but they both remarked him as he came down the steps at a bound. It gave them their first impression of something unusual about the house. "It is seven now," Lady Motherwell said, "and dinner ought to be in half an hour—what an odd moment to go away!" She was still more surprised to see no one but servants when she entered, and to be shown into the deserted drawing-room where there was not a sign of any one about. "I don't know what they mean by it, Charley," Lady Motherwell said; "Mr Brownlow or somebody was always here to receive us before." Sir Charles did not say anything, but he pulled his mustache, and he, too, thought it was rather queer.

When Sara rushed into the library not five minutes before Lady Motherwell's arrival, the consultation there had been broken up. Jack, notwithstanding his many preoccupations, had yet presence of mind enough to remember that it was time to dress, as well as to perceive that all had been said that could be said. Mr Brownlow was alone. He had stolen to the sofa for which he had been longing all the afternoon,

and had laid himself down on it. The room was very dimly lighted by a pair of candles on the mantelpiece. It was a large room, and the faint twinkle of those distant lights made it look ghostly, and it was a very strange sight to see Mr Brownlow lying on a sofa. He roused himself when Sara came in, but it was with an effort, and he was very reluctant to be disturbed. "Seven o'clock!" he said—"is it seven o'clock? but leave me a little longer, my darling; ten minutes is enough for dress."

"Oh, papa," said Sara, "it is dreadful to think of dress at all, or anything so trifling, on such a day; but we must do it—people will think——; I am sure even already they may be thinking——"

"Yes," said Mr Brownlow, vaguely—"I don't think it matters—I would rather have five minutes' sleep."

"Papa," said Sara in desperation, "I have just seen Mr Powys—he has come with some papers—that is, I think he has gone away. He came to—to—I mean he told me he was sent to—— I did not understand what it was, but he has gone away——"

"Ah, he has gone away," said Mr Brownlow, sitting up; "that is all right—all right. And there are the Motherwells coming. Sara, I think Charles Motherwell is a very honest sort of man."

"Yes, papa," said Sara. She was too much excited

and disturbed to perceive clearly what he meant, and yet the contrast of the two names struck her dimly. At such a moment what was Charles Motherwell to her?

"I think he's a very good fellow," said Mr Brownlow, rising; and he went and stirred the smouldering fire. Then he came up to where she stood, watching him. "We shall have to go and live in the house at Masterton," he said, with a sigh. "It will be a strange place for such a creature as you."

"I don't see why it should be strange for me," said Sara; and then her face blazed suddenly with a colour her father did not understand. "Papa, I shall have you all to myself," she said, hurriedly, feeling in her heart more than half a hypocrite. "There will be no troublesome parties like this, and nobody we don't want to see."

Mr Brownlow looked at her half suspiciously; but he did not know what had happened in those two minutes beside the fruit and flowers in the dining-room. He made a desperate effort to recover himself, and to take courage and play out his part steadily to the end.

"We must get through it to-night," he said, "We must keep up for to-night. Go and put on all your pretty things, my darling. You have had to bear the brunt of everything to-day."



"No, papa; it does not matter," said Sara, smothering the longing she had to cry, and tell him—tell him?—she did not know what. And then she turned and put her one question. "Is it true?—have we nothing? Is it all as that terrible woman said?"

Mr Brownlow put his hand on her arm and leaned upon her, slight prop as she was. "You were born in the old house in Masterton," he said, with a certain tone of appeal in his voice; "your mother lived in it. It was bright enough once." Then he stopped and led her gently towards the door. "But, Sara, don't forget," he said hurriedly, "I think a great deal of Charles Motherwell—I am sure he is kind and honest and true."

"He has nothing to do with us!" said Sara, with a thrill of fear.

"I don't know," said Mr Brownlow, almost humbly, "I don't know—if it might be best for you——"

And then he kissed her and sent her away. Sara flew to her own room with her heart beating so loud that it almost choked her. So many excitements all pressing on her together—so many things to think of—was almost more than an ordinary brain could bear. And to dress in all her bravery and go down and look as if nothing had happened—to sit at the head of the table just there where she had been standing half an hour before—to smile and talk and

look her best as if everything was steady under her feet, and she knew of no volcano! And then, to crown all, Sir Charles Motherwell! In the height of her excitement it was perhaps a relief to her to think how at least she would crush that one pretendant. If it should be the last act of her reign at Brownlows, there would be a certain poetic justice in it. If he was so foolish, if he was so persistent, Sara savagely resolved that she would let him propose this time. And then! But then she cried, to Angelique's great discomfiture, without any apparent reason. What was to be done with a young lady who left herself but twenty minutes to dress in, and wept in an unprovoked and exasperating way in the middle of it? Sara was so shaken and driven about by emotion and by self-restraint that she was humble to Angelique in the midst of all her own tumults of soul.

## CHAPTER XL.

### JACK'S LAST TRIAL.

THE dinner passed over without, so far as the guests were aware, any special feature in it. Jack might look out of sorts, perhaps, but then Jack had been out of sorts for some time past. As for Sara, the roses on her cheeks were so much brighter than usual, that some people went so far as to suppose she had stooped to the vulgar arts of the toilette. Sir Charles Motherwell was by her side, and she was talking to him with more than ordinary vivacity. Mr Brownlow, for his part, looked just as usual. People do not trouble themselves to observe whether the head of the house, when it is a man of his age, looks pale or otherwise. He talked just as usual; and though, perhaps, it was he who had suffered most in this crisis, it did not cost him so much now as it did to his son and daughter. And the new people who came only for the evening, and knew no-

thing about it, amused the people who were living at Brownlows, and had felt in the air some indication of the storm. Everything went on well, to the amazement of those who were principally concerned—that is to say, everything went on like a dream; the hours and all the sayings and doings in them, even those which they themselves did and said, swept on, and carried with them the three who had anxieties so much deeper at heart. Sara's cheeks kept burning crimson all the night; and Mr Brownlow stood apart and talked heavily with one or other of his guests; and Jack did the best he could—going so far as to dance, which was an exercise he did not much enjoy. And the guests called it “a very pleasant evening”—with more than ordinary sincerity. When the greater part of those heavy hours had passed, and they began to see the end of their trial, a servant came into the room and addressed himself to Jack, who was just then standing with his partner in the pause of a waltz. Sara, though she was herself flying round the room at the moment, saw it, and lost breath. Mr Brownlow saw it from the little inner drawing-room. It seemed to them that every eye was fixed upon that one point, but the fact was nobody even noticed it but themselves and Jack's partner, who was naturally indignant when he gave up her hand and took her back

to her seat. Somebody wanted to see him, the servant said—somebody who would not take any answer, but insisted on seeing Mr John—somebody from the cottages at the gate. It was Willis himself who came, and he detracted in no way from the importance of the communication. His looks were grave enough for a plenipotentiary. His master, looking at him, felt that Willis must know all ; but Willis, to tell the truth, knew nothing. He felt that something was wrong, and, with the instinct of a British domestic, recognised that it was his duty to make the most of it—that was all. Jack went out following him, but the people who did not know there was anything significant in his going, took very little notice of it. The only visible consequence was, that thenceforward Sara was too tired to dance, and Mr Brownlow forgot what he was saying in the middle of a sentence. Simple as the cause might be, it was alarming to them.

Jack asked the man no questions as he went downstairs ; he was himself wound-up and ready for anything. Whatever additional hardship or burden might come, his position could scarcely be made worse. So he was in a manner indifferent. What could it matter ? In the hall he found Mrs Swayne standing wrapped up in a big shawl. She was excited, and fluttered, and breathless, and almost

unable to speak, and the shawl which was thrown over her head showed that she had come in haste. She put her hand on Jack's arm, and drew him to a side out of hearing of the servants, and then her message burst forth.

"It's not what I ever thought I'd come to. It ain't what I'd do, if e'er a one of us were in our right senses," she cried. "But you must come down to her this very moment. Come along with me, Mr John. It's that dark I've struck my foot again' every tree, and I've come that fast I ain't got a bit of breath left in my body. Come down to her this very moment. Come along with me."

"What is the matter?" said Jack.

"Matter! It's matter enough," gasped Mrs Swayne, "or it never would have been me to come leaving my man in his rheumatics, and the street-door open, and an old shawl over my head. And there ain't one minute to be lost. Get your hat and something to keep you warm, and I'll tell you by the way. It's bitter cold outside."

In spite of himself Jack hesitated. His pride rose up against the summons. Pamela had left him and gone over to her mother's side, and her mother was no longer a nameless poor woman, but the hard creditor who was about to ruin him and his. Though he had vowed that he would never give her up, yet

somehow at that moment his pride got the better of his love. He hesitated, and stood looking at the breathless messenger, who herself, in her turn, began to look at him with a certain contempt.

"If you ain't a-coming, Mr John," said Mrs Swayne, "say so—that's all as I ask. Not as I would be any way surprised. It's like men. When you don't want 'em, they'll come fast enough; but when you're in need, and they might be of some use—Ugh! that ain't my way. I wouldn't be the wretch as would leave that poor young critter in her trouble, all alone."

"All alone—what do you mean?" said Jack, following her to the door, and snatching his hat as he passed. "How can she be alone? Did she send you? What trouble is she in? Woman, can't you tell me what you mean?"

"I won't be called woman by you, not if you was ten times as grand—not if you was a duke or a lord," said Mrs Swayne, rushing out into the night. Beyond the circle of the household lights, the gleaming lamp at the door and lighted windows, the avenue was black as only a path in the heart of the country can be. The night was intensely dark, the rain drizzling, and now and then a shower of leaves falling with the rain. Two or three long strides brought Jack up with the indignant Mrs

Swayne, who ran and stumbled, but made indifferent progress. He took hold of her arm, and in his excitement unconsciously gave her a shake.

"Keep by me and I'll guide you," he said; "and tell me in a word what is the matter, and how she happens to be alone?"

Then Mrs Swayne's passion gave way to tears. "You'd think yourself alone," she cried, "if you was left with one as has had a shock, and don't know you no more than Adam, and ne'er a soul in the house, now I'm gone, but poor old Swayne with his rheumatics, as can't stir, not to save his life. You'd think it yourself if it was you. But catch a man a-forgetting hisself like that; and the first thought in her mind was for you. Oh me! oh me! She thought you'd ha' come like an arrow out of a bow."

"A shock?" said Jack vaguely to himself; and then he let go his hold of Mrs Swayne's arm. "I can't wait for you," he said; "I can be there quicker than you." And he rushed wildly into the darkness, forsaking her. He was at the gate before the bewildered woman, thus abandoned, could make two steps in advance. As he dashed past old Betty's cottage, he saw inside the lighted window a face he knew, and though he did not recognise who it was, a certain sense of help at hand came



over him. Another moment and he was in Mrs Swayne's cottage, so far recollecting himself as to tread more softly as he rushed up the dark and narrow stair. When he opened the door, Pamela gave but one glance round to greet him. She was alone, as Mrs Swayne had said. On the bed by which she stood lay a marble figure, dead to all appearance except for its eyes. Those eyes moved in the strangest, most terrible way, looking wildly round and round, now at the ceiling, now at the window, now at Pamela, imperious and yet agonised. And poor little Pamela, soft girlish creature, stood desperate, trying to read what they said. She had not a word to give to Jack—not even a look, except for one brief moment. “What does she want—what does she want?” she cried. “Oh, mamma! mamma! will you not *try* to speak?”

“Is there no one with you?” said Jack. “Have you sent for the doctor? How long has she been like this? My darling! my poor little darling! Has the doctor seen her yet?”

“I sent for you,” said Pamela, piteously. “Oh, what does she want? I think she could speak if she would only try.”

“It is the doctor she wants,” cried Jack. “That is the first thing;” and he turned and rushed downstairs still more rapidly than he had come up. The

first thing he did was to go across to old Betty's cottage, and send the old woman to Pamela's aid, or at least, if aid was impossible, to remain with her. There he found Powys, who was waiting till the guests went away from Brownlows. Him Jack placed in Mrs Swayne's parlour, to be ready to lend any assistance that might be wanted, or to call succour from the great house if necessary; and then he himself buttoned his coat and set off on a wild race over hedge and field for the doctor. The nearest doctor was in Dewsbury, a mile and a half away. Jack knew every step of the country, and plunged into the unseen byways and across the ploughed fields; in so short a time that Mrs Swayne had scarcely reached her own house, he dashed back again in the doctor's gig. Then he went into the dark little parlour to wait and take breath. He was in evening dress, just as he had been dancing; his light varnished boots were heavy with ploughed soil and wet earth, his shirt wet with rain, his whole appearance wild and dishevelled. Powys looked at him with the strange mixture of repugnance and liking that existed between the young men, and drew forward a chair for him before the dying fire.

"Why did not you let me go?" he said. "I was in better trim for it than you."

"You did not know the way," said Jack; "besides, there are things that nobody can do for one." Then he added, after a pause, "Her daughter is going to be my wife."

"Ah!" said Powys, with a sigh, half of sympathy, half of envy. He did not think of Jack's circumstances in any speculative way, but only as comparing them with his own hard and humble fate, who should never have a wife, as he said to himself—to whom it was mere presumption, madness, to think of love at all.

"Yes," said Jack, putting his wet feet to the fire; and then he too gave forth a big sigh from his excited breast, and felt the liking grow stronger than the repugnance, and that he must speak to some one or die.

"It is a pretty mess," he said; "I thought they were very poor, and it turns out she has a right to almost all my father has—trust-money that was left to him if he could not find her; and he was never able to find her. And, at last, after all was settled between us, she turns up; and now, I suppose, she's going to die."

"I hope not," said Powys, not knowing what answer to make.

"It's easy to say you hope not," said Jack, "but she will—you'll see she will. I never saw such

a woman. And then what am I to do?—forsake my poor Pamela, who does not know a word of it, because she is an heiress, or marry her and rob my father? You may think yours is a hard case, but I'd like to know what you would do if you were me?"

"I should not forsake her anyhow," said Powys, kindling with the thought.

"And neither shall I, by Jove," said Jack, getting up in his vehemence. "What should I care for fathers and mothers, or any fellow in the world? It's all that cursed money—that's what it always is. It comes in your way and in my way wherever a man turns—not that one can get on without it either," said Jack, suddenly sitting down and leaning over the fire with his face propped up in his two hands.

"Some of us have got to do without it," said Powys, with a short laugh, though he did not see anything amusing in it. Yet there was a certain bitter drollery in the contrast between his own little salary and the family he had already to support on it, and Jack's difficulties at finding that his Cinderella had turned into a fairy princess. Jack gave a hasty glance at him as if fearing that he himself was being laughed at. But poor Powys had a sigh coming so close after his laugh that it

was impossible to suspect him of mockery. Jack sighed too, for company. His heart was opened; and the chance of talking to anybody was a god-send to him in that moment of suspense.

"Were you to have been with us this evening?" he said. "Why did not you come? My father always likes to see you."

"He does not care to see me now," said Powys, with a little bitterness; "I don't know why. I went up to carry him some papers, against my will. He took me to your house at first against my own judgment. It would have been better for me I had walked over a precipice or been struck down like the poor lady up-stairs."

"No," said Jack, pitying, and yet there was a touch of condescension in his voice. "Don't say so—not so bad as that. A man may make a mistake, and yet it need not kill him. There's the doctor—I must hear what he has to say."

The doctor came in looking very grave. He said there were signs of some terrible mental tumult and shock she had received; that all the symptoms were of the worst kind, and that he had no hope whatever for her life. She might recover her faculties and be able to speak; but it was almost certain that she must die. This was the verdict pronounced upon Mrs Preston as the carriage lamps of the de-

parting guests began to gleam down the avenue, and old Betty rushed across to open the gates, and the horses came prancing out into the road. Pamela caught a momentary glimpse of them as she moved about the room, and it suddenly occurred to her to remember her own childish delight at the sight when she first came. And oh, how many things had happened since then! And this last of all which she understood least. She was sick with terror and wonder, and her head ached and her heart throbbed. They were her mother's eyes which looked at her so, and yet she was afraid of them. How was she ever to live out the endless night?

It was a dreadful night for more people than Pamela. Powys went up to the great house very shortly after to carry the news to Mr Brownlow, who was so much overcome by it that he shivered and trembled and looked for the moment like a feeble old man. He sank down into his chair, and could not speak at first. "God forgive me," he said when he had recovered himself. "I am afraid I had ill thoughts of her—very ill thoughts—in my head. Sara, you heard all—was I harsh to her? It could not be anything I said?"

"No, papa," said Sara, trembling, and she came to him and drew his head for a moment to her young, tremulous, courageous breast. And Powys stood

looking on with a pang in his heart. He did not understand what all this meant, but he knew that she was his, and yet could not be his. He dared not go and console her as he had done in his madness when they were alone.

Mr Brownlow would not go to bed; he sat and watched, and sent for news through the whole long night. And Powys, who knew only by Jack's short and incoherent story what important issues were involved, served him faithfully as his messenger coming and going. The thoughts that arose in Mr Brownlow's mind were not to be described. It was not possible that compunction such as that which moved him at first could be his only feeling. As the hours went on, a certain strange mixture of satisfaction and reproach against Providence came into his mind. He said Providence in his mind, being afraid and ashamed to say God. If Providence was about to remove this obstacle out of his way, it would seem but fitting and natural; but why, then why, when it was to be, not have done it a few days sooner? Two days sooner?—that would have made all the difference. Now the evil she had done would not die with her, though it might be lessened. In these unconscious inarticulate thoughts, which came by no will of his, which haunted him indeed against his will, there rose a certain upbraiding against the tardy

fate. It was too late. The harm was done. As it was, it seemed natural that his enemy should be taken out of his way, for Providence had ever been very kind to him—but why should it be this one day too late?

Jack sat down-stairs in Mrs Swayne's parlour all the night. The fire went out, and he had not the heart to have it lighted: one miserable candle burnt dully in the chill air. Now and then Powys came in from the darkness without, glowing from his rapid walk; sometimes Mrs Swayne came creaking down-stairs to tell him there was no change; once or twice he himself stole up to see the same awful sight. Poor Pamela, for her part, sat by the bedside half-stupefied by her vigil. She had not spirit enough left to give one answering look to her lover. Her brain was racking with devices to make out what her mother meant. She kept talking to her, pleading with her, entreating—oh, if she would but try to speak! and ever in desperation making another and another effort to get at her meaning. Jack could not bear the sight. The misery, and darkness, and suspense down-stairs were less dreadful at least than this. Even the doctor, though he knew nothing of what lay below, had been apparently excited by the external aspect of affairs, and came again before daybreak to see if any change were perceptible. It was that



hour of all others most chilling and miserable ; that hour which every watcher knows, just before dawn, when the darkness seems more intense, the cold more keen, the night more lingering and wretched than at any other moment. Jack in his damp and thin dress walked shivering about the little black parlour, unable to keep still.

She might die and make no sign ; and if she did so, was it possible still to ignore all that had happened, and to bestow her just heritage on Pamela only under cover as his wife ? This was the question that racked him as he waited and listened ; but when the doctor went up just before daybreak a commotion was heard in the room above. Jack stood still for a moment holding his breath, and then he rushed up-stairs. Before he got into the room there arose suddenly a hoarse voice which was scarcely intelligible. It was Mrs Preston who was speaking. "What was it ? what was it ?" she was crying wildly. "What did I tell you, child ?" and then, as he opened the door, a great outcry filled the air. "Oh, my God, I've forgotten — I've forgotten !" cried the dying woman. She was sitting up in her bed in a last wild rally of all her powers. Motion and speech had come back to her. She was propping herself up on her two thin arms, thrusting herself forward with a strained and excessive mus-

cular action, such as extreme weakness sometimes is equal to. As she looked round wildly with the same eager impotent look that had rung the beholders' hearts while she was speechless, her eye fell on Jack, who was standing at the door. She gave a sudden shriek of mingled triumph and entreaty. "You can tell them," she said—"you can tell me—come and tell me—tell me! Pamela, there is one that knows."

"Oh, mamma, I don't want to hear," cried Pamela; "oh, lie down and take what the doctor says; oh, mamma, mamma, if you care for me! Don't sit up and wear out your strength, and break my heart."

"It's for you—it's all for you!" cried the sufferer; and she moved the hands on which she was supporting herself, and threw forward her ghastly head, upon which Death itself seemed to have set its mark. "I've no time to lose—I'm dying, and I've forgotten it all. Oh, my God, to think I should forget! Come here, if you are a man, and tell me what it was!"

Jack stepped forward, like a man in a dream. He saw that she might fall and die the next moment; her worn bony arms began to tremble, her head fell forward, her eyes staring at him seemed to loosen in their sockets. Perhaps she had but half an hour longer to live. The strength of death was in her

no less than its awful weakness. "Tell me," she repeated, in a kind of babble, as if she could not stop. Pamela, who never thought nor questioned what her mother's real meaning was, kept trying, with tears and all her soft force, to lay her down on the pillows; and the doctor, who thought her raving, stood by and looked on with a calm professional eye, attributing all her excitement to the delirium of death. In the midst of this preoccupied group Jack stood forward, held by her eye. An unspeakable struggle was going on in his mind. Nobody believed there was any meaning in her words. Was it he that must give them a meaning, and furnish forth the testimony that was needed against himself? It was but to be silent, that was all, and no one would be the wiser. Mrs Swayne, too, was in the room, curious but unsuspicious. They all thought it was she who was "wandering," and not that he had anything to tell.

Then once more she raised her voice, which grew harsher and weaker every moment. "I am dying," she cried; "if you will not tell me I will speak to God. I will speak to Him—about it—He—will send word—somehow. Oh, my God, tell me—tell me—what was it?—before I die."

Then they all looked at him, not with any real suspicion, but wondering. Jack was as pale almost as the dying creature who thus appealed to him.

"I will tell you," he said, in a broken voice. "It was about money. I can't speak about legacies and interest here. I will speak of it—when—you are better. I will see—that she has her rights."

"Money!" cried Mrs Preston, catching at the word—"money—my mother's money—that is what it was. A fortune, Pamela! and you'll have friends—plenty of friends when I'm gone. Pamela, Pamela, it's all for you."

Then she fell back rigid, not yielding, but conquered; for a moment it seemed as if some dreadful fit was coming on; but presently she relapsed into the state in which she had been before—dumb, rigid, motionless, with a frame of ice, and two eyes of fire. Jack staggered out of the room, broken and worn out; the very doctor, when he followed, begged for wine, and swallowed it eagerly. It was more than even his professional nerves could bear.

"She ought to have died then," he said; "by all sort of rules she ought to have died; but I don't see much difference in her state now; she might go on like that for days—no one can say."

Jack was not able to make any answer; he was worn out as if with hard work; his forehead was damp with exhaustion; he too gulped down some of the wine Mrs Swayne brought them, but he had no strength to make any reply.

"Mr Brownlow, let me advise you to go home," said the doctor; "no one can do any good here. You must make the young lady lie down, Mrs Swayne. There will be no immediate change, and there is nothing to be done but to watch her. If she should recover consciousness again, don't cross her in anything; give her the drops if possible, and watch—that's all that can be done. I shall come back in the course of the day."

And in the grey dawning Jack too went home. He was changed; conflict and doubt had gone out of him. In their place a sombre cloud seemed to have taken him up. It was justice, remorseless and uncompromising, that thus overshadowed him. Expediency was not to be his guide,—not though it should be a thousand times better, wiser, more desirable, than any other course of action. It was not what was best that had now to be considered, but only what was right. It never occurred to him that any further struggle could be made. He felt himself no longer Pamela's betrothed lover, whose natural place was to defend and protect her, but her legal guardian and adviser, bound to consider her interests and make the best of everything; the champion, not of herself, but of her fortune—that fortune which seemed to step between and separate them for ever. When he was half-way up the avenue it occurred to

him that he had forgotten Powys, and he went back again to look for him. He had grown as a brother to him during this long night. Powys, however, was gone. Before Jack left the house he had set off for Masterton with the instinct of a man who has his daily work to do, and cannot indulge in late hours. Poor fellow! Jack thought in his heart. It was hard upon him to be sacrificed to Mr Brownlow's freak and Sara's vanity. But though he was himself likely to be a fellow-sufferer, it did not occur to Jack to intercede for Powys, or even to imagine that now he need not be sacrificed. Such an idea never entered into his head. Everything was quiet in Brownlows when he went home. Mr Brownlow had been persuaded to go to his room, and except the weary and reproachful servant who admitted Jack, there was nobody to be seen. He went up to his own room in the cold early daylight, passing by the doors of his visitors with a certain bitterness, and at the same time contempt. He was scornful of them for their ignorance, for their indifference, for their faculty of being amused and seeing no deeper. A parcel of fools! he said to himself; and yet he knew very well they were not fools, and was more thankful than he could express that their thoughts were directed to other matters, and that they were as yet unsuspecting of the real state of affairs. Every-

body was quite unsuspecting, even the people who surrounded Pamela. They saw something was amiss, but they had no idea what it was. Only himself, in short, knew to its full extent the trouble which had overwhelmed him. Only he knew that it was his hard fate to be his father's adversary, and the legal adviser of his betrothed bride; separated from the one by his opposition, from the other by his guardianship. He would win the money away from his own flesh and blood, and he would lose them in doing so; he would win it for his love, and in the act he would lose Pamela. Neither son nor lover henceforward, neither happy and prosperous in taking his own will, nor beloved and cherished in standing by those who belonged to him. He would establish Pamela's rights, and secure her in her fortune, but never could he share that fortune. It was an inexorable fate which had overtaken him. Just as Brutus, but with no praise for being just; this was to be his destiny. Jack flung himself listlessly on his bed, and turned his face from the light. It was a cruel fate.

## CHAPTER XLI.

### SIR CHARLES MOTHERWELL.

THE guests at Brownlows next morning got up with minds a little relieved. Notwithstanding the evident excitement of the family, things had passed over quietly enough, and nothing had happened, and indifferent spectators easily accustom themselves to any atmosphere, and forget the peculiarities in it. There might still be a smell of brimstone in the air, but their organs were habituated, and failed to perceive it. After breakfast Sir Charles Motherwell had a little talk with Mr Brownlow, as he smoked his morning cigar in the avenue; but nobody, except perhaps his mother, who was alive to his movements, took any notice of what he was doing. Once more the men in the house were left to themselves; but it did not strike them so oddly as on the day before. And Sara, for her part, was easier in her mind. She could not help it. It might be wicked even, but



she could not help it. She was sorry Mrs Preston should die; but since Providence had so willed it, no doubt it was the best for everybody. This instinctive argument came to Sara as to all the rest. Nobody was doing it. It was Providence, and it was for the best. And Jack would marry Pamela, and Sara would go with her father to Masterton, and, but for the shock of Mrs Preston's death, which would wear off in the course of nature, all would go merry as a marriage-bell. This was how she had planned it all out to herself; and she saw no difficulty in it. Accordingly, she had very much recovered her spirits. Of course, the house at Masterton would not be so pleasant as Brownlows; at least—in some things it might not be so pleasant—but—— And so, though she might be a little impatient, and a little preoccupied, things were decidedly brighter with Sara that morning. She was in the dining-room as usual, giving the housekeeper the benefit of her views about dinner, when Sir Charles came in. He saw her, and he lingered in the hall waiting for her, and her vengeful project of the previous night occurred to Sara. If she was to be persecuted any more about him, she would let him propose; charitably, feelingly, she had staved off that last ceremony; but now, if she was to be threatened with him—if he was to be thrown in her face—— And he looked

very sheepish and awkward as he stood in the hall, pulling at the black mustache which was so like a respirator. She saw him, and she prolonged his suspense, poor fellow. She bethought herself of a great many things she had to say to the housekeeper. And he stood outside, like a faithful dog, and waited. When she saw that he would not go away, Sara gave in to necessity. "Lady Motherwell is in the morning-room, and all the rest," she said, as she joined him; and then turned to lead the way up-stairs.

"I don't want to see my mother," he said, with a slight shudder, she thought; and then he made a very bold effort. "Fine morning," said Sir Charles; "aw—would you mind taking a little walk?"

"Taking a walk?" said Sara, in amaze.


"Aw—yes—or—I'd like to speak to you for ten minutes," said Sir Charles, with growing embarrassment; "fact is, Miss Brownlow, I don't want to see my mother."

"That is very odd," said Sara, tempted to laughter; "but still you might walk by yourself, without seeing Lady Motherwell. There would not be much protection in having me."

"It was not for—protection, nor—nor that sort of thing," stammered Sir Charles, growing very red—"fact is, Miss Brownlow, it was something I had to say—to you——"

"Oh!" said Sara: she saw it was coming now; and, fortified by her resolution, she made no further effort to smother it. This, at least, she could do, and nobody had any right to interfere with her. She might be in her very last days of sovereignty; a few hours might see her fallen—fallen from her high estate; but, at least, she could refuse Charley Motherwell. That was a right of which neither cruel father nor adverse fortune could deprive her. She made no further resistance, or attempt to get away. "If it is only to speak to me, we can talk in the library," she said; "it is too early to go out." And so saying, she led the way into Mr Brownlow's room. Notwithstanding the strange scenes she had seen in it, it did not chill Sara in her present mood. But it evidently had a solemnising effect on Sir Charles. She walked across to the fire, which was burning cheerfully, and placed herself in one of the big chairs which stood by, arranging her pretty skirts within its heavy arms, which was a troublesome operation; and then she pointed graciously to the other. "Sit down," she said, "and tell me what it is about."

It was not an encouraging opening for a bashful lover. It was not like this that she had received Powys's sudden wild declarations, his outbursts of passionate presumption. She had been timid enough then, and had faltered and failed to herself, some-



what as poor Sir Charles was doing. He did not accept her kind invitation to seat himself, but stood before her in front of the fire, and looked more awkward than ever. Poor fellow, he had a great deal on his mind.

"Miss Brownlow," he burst out, all at once, after he had fidgeted about for five minutes, pulling his mustache and looking at her, "I am a bad fellow to talk. I never know what to say. I've got into heaps of scrapes from people mistaking what I mean."

"Indeed, I am sure I am very sorry," said Sara; "but I think I always understand what you mean."

"Yes," he said, with relief, "aw—I've observed that. You're one that does, and my mother's one; but never mind my mother just now," he went on precipitately. "For instance, when a fellow wants to ask a girl to marry him, everything has to be understood—a mistake about that would be awful—would be dreadful—I mean, you know, it wouldn't do."

"It wouldn't do at all," said Sara, looking at him with terrible composure, and without even the ghost of a smile.

"Yes," said Sir Charles, revolving on his own axis, "it might be a horrid mess. That's why I wanted to see you, to set out with, before I spoke to my

mother. My mother's a little old-fashioned. I've just been talking to Mr Brownlow. I can make my—aw—any girl very comfortable. It's not a bad old place; and as for settlements and that sort of thing——”

“I should be very glad to give you my advice, I am sure,” said Sara, demurely; “but I should like first to know who the lady is.”

“The lady!” cried Sir Charles—“aw—upon my word, it's too bad. That's why I said everything must be very plain. Miss Brownlow, there's not a girl in the world but yourself—not one!—aw—you know what I mean. I'd go down on my knees, or anything; only you'd laugh, I know, and I'd lose my—my head.” All this he said with immense rapidity, moving up and down before her. Then he suddenly came to a standstill, and looked into her face. “I know I can't talk,” he said; “but, you know, of course, it's you. What would be the good of coming like this, and—and making a fool of myself, if it wasn't you?”

“But it can't be me, Sir Charles,” said Sara, growing, in spite of herself, out of sympathy, a little agitated, and forgetting the humour of the situation. “It can't be me—don't say any more. If you only knew what has been happening to us——”

“I know,” cried Sir Charles, coming a step closer;

"that's why—though I don't mean that's why from the commencement, for I only heard this morning; and that's why I don't want to see my mother. You need not think it matters to me—I've got plenty, and we could have your father to live with us, if you like."

Sara stood up with the intention of making him a stately and serious answer, but as she looked at his eager face, bent forward and gazing down at her, a sudden change came over her feelings. She had been laughing at him a moment before; now, all at once, without any apparent provocation, she burst into tears. Sir Charles was very much dismayed. It did not occur to him to take advantage of her weeping, as Powys had done. He stared, and he drew a step farther back, and fell into a state of consternation. "I've said something I ought not to have said," he exclaimed; "I know I'm a wretched fellow to talk; but then I thought you would understand."

"I do understand," cried Sara, in her impulsive way; "and papa was quite right, and I am a horrid wretch, and you are the best man in the world!"

"Not so much as that," said Sir Charles, with a smile of satisfaction, which showed all his teeth under his black mustache; "but as long as you are pleased—— Don't cry. We'll settle it all between

us, and make him comfortable; and as for you and me——”

He made a step forward, beaming with content as he spoke, and poor Sara, drying her eyes hastily, and waking up to the urgency of the situation, retreated as he advanced.

“But, Sir Charles,” she cried, clasping her hands —“Oh! what a wretch I am to take you in and vex you! Stop! I did not mean that. I meant—oh! I could kill myself—I think you are the best and kindest and truest man in the world, but it can never be me!”

Sir Charles stopped short. That air of flattered vanity and imbecile self-satisfaction with which most men receive the idea of being loved, suddenly yielded in his face to intense surprise. “Why? how? what? I don’t understand,” he stammered; and stood amazed, utterly at a loss to know what she could mean.

“It can never be me!” cried Sara. “I am not much good. I don’t deserve to be cared for. You will find somebody else a great deal nicer. There are girls in the house even—there is Fanny. Don’t be angry. I don’t think there is anything particular in me.”

“But it is only you I fancy,” cried Sir Charles, deluded, poor man, by this humility, and once more

lighting up with complaisance and self-satisfaction. "Fact is, we could be very comfortable together. I don't know about any other girls. You're nice enough for me."

Then Sara sank once more into the chair where a few minutes before she had established herself with such state and dignity. "Don't say any more," she cried again, clasping her hands. "Don't! I shall like you, and be grateful to you all my life; but it can never be me!"

If Sara had been so foolish as to imagine that her unimpassioned suitor would be easily got rid of, she now found out her error. He stared at her, and he took a little walk around the table, and then he came back again. The facts of the case had not penetrated his mind. Her delicate intimations had no effect upon him. "If you like me," he said, "that's enough—fact is, I don't see how any girl could be nicer. They say all girls talk like this at first. You and I might be very comfortable; and as for my mother—you know if you wanted to have the house to yourself——"

"Would you be so wicked as to go and turn out your mother?" cried Sara, suddenly flashing into indignation, "and for a girl you know next to nothing about? Sir Charles, I never should have expected this of you."



Poor Sir Charles fell back utterly disconcerted. "It was all to make you comfortable," he said. "Of course I'd like my mother to stay. It was all for you."

"And I told you it could never be me," cried Sara—"never! I am going to Masterton with papa to take care of him. It is he who wants me most. And then I must say good-bye to everybody; I shall only be the attorney's daughter at Masterton; we shall be quite different; but, Sir Charles, I shall always like you and wish you well. You have been so very good and kind to me."

Then Sara waved her hand to him, and went towards the door. As for Sir Charles, he was too much bewildered to speak for the first moment. He stood and stared and let her pass him. It had never entered into his mind that this interview was to come to so abrupt an end. But before she left the room he had made a long step after her. "We could take care of him at Motherwell," he said, "just as well. Miss Brownlow, look here. It don't make any difference to me. If you had not a penny, you are just the same as you always were. If you like me, that is enough for me."

"But I don't like you!" said Sara, in desperation, turning round upon him, with her eyes flashing fiercely, her mouth quivering pathetically, her tears

falling fast. "I mean I like somebody else better. Don't, please, say any more—thanks for being so good and kind to me; and good-bye—good-bye!"

Then she seized his hand like the vehement creature she was, and clasped it close in her soft hands, and turned and fled. That was the only word for it. She fled, never pausing to look back. And Sir Charles, utterly bewildered and disconcerted, stayed behind. The first thing he did was to walk back to the fire, the natural attraction of a man in trouble. Then he caught a glimpse of his own discomfited countenance in the glass. "By George!" he said to himself, and turned his back upon the rueful visage. It was the wildest oath he ever permitted himself, poor fellow, and he showed the most overwhelming perturbation. He stood there a long time, thinking it over. He was not a man of very fine feelings, and yet he felt very much cast down. Though his imagination was not brilliant, it served to recall her to him with all her charms. And his honest heart ached. "What do I care for other girls?" he said to himself. "What good is Fanny to me?" He stood half the morning on the hearth-rug, sometimes turning round to look at his own dejected countenance in the glass, and sometimes to poke the fire. He had no heart to put himself within reach of his mother, or to look at the other girls. When the bell

rang for luncheon he rushed out into the damp woods. Such a thing had never happened in his respectable life before: and this was the end of Sir Charles Motherwell's little romance.

Sara, though she did not regret Sir Charles, was more agitated than she could have supposed possible when she left the library; there are young ladies, no doubt, who are hardened to it; but an ordinary mortal feels a little sympathetic trouble in most cases, when she has had to decide (so far) upon another creature's fate. And though he was not bright, he had behaved very well; and then her own affairs were in such utter confusion. She could not even look her future in the face, and say she had any prospects. If she were to live a hundred years, how could she ever marry her father's clerk? and how could he so much as dream of marrying her—he who had nothing, and a family to maintain? Poor Sara went to her own room, and had a good cry over Sir Charles in the first (but least) place, and herself in the second. What was to become of her? To be the attorney's daughter in Masterton was not the brightest of fates—and beyond that—— She cried, and she did not get any satisfaction from the thought of having refused Sir Charles. It was very, very good and nice of him—and oh, if it had only been Fanny on whom he had set his fancy! Her eyes

were still red when she went down-stairs, and it surprised her much to see her father leaving the morning-room as she approached. Lady Motherwell was there with a very excited and pale face, and one or two other ladies with a look of consternation about them. One who was leaving the room stopped as she did so, took Sara in her arms, though it was quite uncalled for, and gave her a hasty kiss. "My poor dear!" said this kind woman. As for Lady Motherwell, she was in quite a different state of mind.

"Where is Charley?" she cried. "Miss Brownlow, I wish you would tell me where my son is. It is very strange. He is a young man who never cares to be long away from his mother; but since we have been in this house, he has forsaken me."

"I saw him in the library," said Sara. "I think he is there now. I will go and call him, if you like." This she said because she was angry, and without any intention of doing what she said.

"I am much obliged to you, I am sure," said the old lady, who, up to this moment, had been so sweet to Sara, and called her by every caressing name. "I will ring and send a servant, if you will permit me. We have just been hearing some news that my dear boy ought to know."

"If it is something papa has been telling you, I think Sir Charles knows already," said Sara. Lady

Motherwell gave her head an angry toss, and rang the bell violently. She took no further notice of the girl whom she had professed to be so fond of. "Inquire if Sir Charles Motherwell is below," she said. "Tell him I have ordered my carriage, and that his man is putting up his things. We are going in half an hour."

It was at this moment the luncheon-bell rang, and Sir Charles plunged wildly out into the woods. Perhaps the sound of the bell mollified Lady Motherwell. She was an old lady who liked luncheon. Probably it occurred to her that to have some refreshment before she left would do nobody any harm. Her son could not make any proposals at table under her very eyes; or perhaps a touch of human feeling came over her. "I meant to say we are going directly after luncheon," she said, turning to Sara. "You will be very glad to get rid of us all, if Mr Brownlow really means what he says."

"Oh, yes, he means it," said Sara, with a little smile of bitterness; "but it is always best to have luncheon first. I think you will find your son downstairs."

"You seem to know," said Lady Motherwell; "perhaps that is why we have had so little of your company this morning. The society of young men is pleasanter than that of old ladies like me."

"The society of *some* young men is pleasant enough," said Sara, unable to suppress the retort; and she stood aside and let her guest pass, sweeping in her long silken robes. Lady Motherwell headed the procession; and of the ladies who followed, two or three made little consoling speeches to Sara as they clustered after her. "It will not turn out half so bad as your papa supposes," said one. "I don't see that he had any need to tell. We have all had our losses—but we don't go and publish them to all the world."

"And if it should be as bad, never mind, Sara," said another. "We shall all be as fond of you as ever. You must not think it hard-hearted if we go away."

"Oh, Sara, dear, I shall be so sorry to leave you; but he would not have told us," said a third, "if he had not wanted us to go away."

"I don't know what you all mean," said Sara. "I think you want to make me lose my senses. Is it papa that wants you to go away?"

"He told us he had lost a great deal of money, and perhaps he might be ruined," said the last of all, twining her arm in Sara's. "You must come to us, dear, if there is any breaking up. But perhaps it may not be as bad as he says."

"Perhaps not," said Sara, holding up her head


proudly. It was the only answer she made. She swept past them all to her place at the head of the table, with a grandeur that was quite unusual, and looked round upon her guests like a young queen. "Papa," she said, at the top of her sweet young voice, addressing him at the other end of the table, "when you have unpleasant news to tell, you should not tell it before luncheon. I hope it will not hurt anybody's appetite." This was all the notice she took of the embarrassing information that had thrown such a cloud of confusion over the guests. Mr Brownlow, too, had recovered his calm. He had meant only to tell Lady Motherwell, knowing at the moment that her son was pleading his suit with Sara down-stairs. He had told Sir Charles, and the news had but made him more eager; and, with a certain subtle instinct that came of his profession, Mr Brownlow, that nobody might be able to blame him, went and told the mother too. It was Lady Motherwell's amazed and indignant exclamations that spread the news. And now both he and the old lady were equally on tenterhooks of expectation. They wanted to know what had come of it. Sara, for anything they knew, might be Sir Charley's betrothed at this moment. Mr Brownlow, with a kind of hope, tried to read what was in his child's face, and Lady Motherwell looked at her with a kind of

despair. Sara, roused to her full strength, smiled and baffled them both.

"Sir Charles is in the library," she said. "Call him, Willis; he might be too much engaged—he might not hear the bell."

But at this moment another bell was heard, which struck strangely upon the excited nerves of the company. It was the bell at the door, which, as that door was always open, and there was continually some servant or other in the hall, was never rung. On this occasion it was pulled wildly, as by some one in overwhelming haste. The dining-room door was open at the moment, and the conversation at table was so hushed and uncomfortable that the voice outside was clearly audible. It was something about "Miss Sara," and "to come directly." They all heard it, their attention being generally aroused. Then came a rush which made every one start and turn round. It was Mrs Swayne, with her bonnet thrust over her eyes, red and breathless with running. "She's a-dying—she's a-dying," said the intruder. "And I'm ready to drop. And, Miss Sara, she's a-calling for you."

Sara rose up, feeling her self-command put to the utmost test. But before she could even ask a question, Jack, who had been sitting very silently at the middle of the table, started up and rushed to






the door. Mrs Swayne put him back with her hand. "It's Miss Sara," she said—"Miss Sara—Miss Sara—that's who she's a-calling of. Keep out of her sight, and don't aggravate her. Miss Sara, it's you."

And then the room seemed to reel round poor Sara, who had come to the end of her powers. She knew no more about it until she felt the fresh air blowing in her face, as she was half led, half carried, down the avenue. What she was to do, or what was expected from her, she knew not. The fate of the house and of all belonging to it had come into her innocent hands.

## CHAPTER XLII.

### A GUARDIAN.

It was Jack who hurried his sister down the avenue in obedience to that peremptory summons. The effects of the fresh air and rapid movement roused her, as we have said, and nobody but herself had been aware that her strength had ever failed her. Jack was wound up to the last pitch of suspense and agitation; but he could not say a word to her—would not tell her what she was to do. “How can I tell till I see what is wanted of you?” he said, savagely. She did not know what might be laid upon her, or why she was sent for; but she was left to accept the office alone. He gave her no help except his arm to support her down the avenue—a support which was not of much use to Sara, for her brother walked at such a pace that she was scarcely able to keep up with him. He was walking a great deal more rapidly than he was at all aware. Things



had come to a climax in Jack's mind. He was burning with feverish irritation, anxiety, eagerness, and panic. He had thought that his mind was made up, and that nothing further would disturb him. But in a moment he had become more disturbed than ever. The end that must decide everything had come.

There was a certain air of excitement about Swayne's Cottages as they approached. Old Betty's lodge was closed and vacant for one thing, and the gates set wide open; and the blinds were down in Mrs Swayne's windows, and her neighbour stood in the little garden outside watching, with her hand on the door. She was waiting for their coming; and Betty within, who was utterly useless so far as the patient was concerned, flitted up and down stairs looking for the arrival of the visitor who was so anxiously expected. They received Sara with a mixture of eager curiosity and deference. "She's been a-calling for you, Miss," said Mrs Swayne's neighbour, "as if she would go out of her mind." "She's a-calling for you now," cried old Betty: "she don't seem to have another thought in her head—and the Rector by the bedside all the same, and her so near her latter end!" Even Mr Swayne himself, with his wife's shawl round him, had come to the kitchen door to join in the general sentiment.

"The Lord be praised as you've come, Miss Sara," he said. "I thought as she'd have driven me wild." This preface was not of a kind to calm Sara's nerves. She went up-stairs confused with all the salutations addressed to her, and full of awe, almost of fear. To be sent for by a woman on her deathbed was of itself something alarming and awful. And this woman above all.

As for Jack, all that he heard of this babble was the intimation that the Rector was there. It added another spark, if that were possible, to the fire in his heart. The doctor knew all about it—now here was another, yet another, to be taken into the dying woman's confidence. Though nobody asked for him, and though his presence seemed little desirable, he went up after his sister without saying a word to any one. They could hear the voice of the patient as they approached—a voice almost unintelligible, thick and babbling, like the voice of an idiot, and incessant. Mrs Preston's eyes, still blazing with wild anxiety and suspicion, met Sara's wondering, wistful gaze as she went timidly into the room. Pamela stood by like a ghost with utter weariness and a kind of dull despair in her pallid face. She could not understand what it all meant. To her the *mot* of the enigma, which had been wanting at the commencement, could now never be supplied, for

she was too completely worn out in body and mind to be able to receive a new idea. She beckoned to Sara almost impatiently as she opened the door. "Yes, mamma, she has come—she has come," said Pamela. Mr Hardcastle was standing behind her with his prayer-book in his hand, looking concerned and impatient. He was amazed at the neglect with which he was being treated in the first place; and, to do him justice, he also felt strongly that, as Betty said, she was near her latter end, and other interests should be foremost in her mind. Old Betty herself came pressing in after Jack, and Mrs Swayne followed her a few minutes later, and the neighbour stood outside on the landing. Their curiosity was roused to such a pitch that it eclipsed every other feeling—not that the women were hard-hearted or indifferent to the solemn moment which was at hand, but they all wanted to know what she could have to say to Sara, and they were all curious to witness the tragedy about to be enacted, and to see whether she made a good end.

"Ah, she's come," said Mrs Preston, in her thick voice. "Bring her here to me.—Not *him*—I don't want him. Sara! come here! It's you I can speak to—only you. Give me something. I have a dozen words to say, and I must say them strong."

"Here, mamma," said Pamela, who watched with

a sort of mechanical accuracy every indication of her mother's will ; and she put her soft arm under Mrs Preston's head and raised her with a strain of her slight girlish form, which at another moment would have been impossible. Jack made a step forward involuntarily to help her, but stopped short, arrested by the dying woman's eyes, which she fixed upon him over Pamela's shoulder as the cordial which was to give her strength to speak was put to her lips. She stopped even at that moment to look at him. "Not you," she said, hoarsely—"not you." It was not that he cared what she said, or even understood it, in his own excitement ; but Pamela had her back turned upon him as she supported her mother ; and Jack felt with a pang of poignant humiliation that there was no place for him there. Even her interests, the charge of her, seemed to be passing out of his hands.

"If you are going to speak to me—about—anything," cried Sara, "I don't know what it is—nor why you should send for *me* ; but do you want all these people too ?"

Mrs Preston looked at them vaguely—but she took no notice of what Sara said. "I have sent for you," she cried, uttering two or three words at a time, as if making a last effort to be intelligible, "because you saved me. I leave her to you ; you're



"Not to Pamela!" cried Sara, carried away by the vehemence of her feelings. "Oh, Mrs Preston, try! You are strong yet—you could live if you were to try."

A kind of spasm passed over the poor woman's face. Perhaps a momentary hope of being able to make that effort crossed her mind—perhaps it was only a terrible smile at the vanity of the proposal. But it passed and left her eyes more wild in their passionate entreaty than before. "You don't—answer," she said; "you forsake me—like the rest. Sara! Sara! you are killing me. She is killing me. Give me an answer. Oh, my God, she will not speak!"

Sara looked round upon them all in her dismay. "You should have the doctor," she said: her inexperienced mind had seized upon Pamela's incoherent remonstrance. "Where is the doctor? Oh, could not something be done for her if he was here?"

Then Pamela gave a low cry. Her mother, who had been motionless for hours, after a wild struggle turned her head round upon the pillow. Her palsied fingers fluttered on the coverlid as if with an attempt to stretch themselves out toward Sara. Her eyes were ready to start from their sockets. "She will not speak to me!" she cried—"although she saved



me. I make her guardian of my child. Do you hear?—is there any one to hear me? She is to take care of my Pamela. She is killing me. Sara! Sara! do you hear? I am speaking to you. You are to take care of my Pamela. I leave her to you——”

“Do what she says,” said a low voice at Sara’s shoulder. “Promise anything—everything. She must not be thwarted now.”

Sara did not know who it was that spoke. She made a step forward, recovering her native impetuosity. She laid her warm living hand upon the cold half-dead one of the dying woman and left it there, though the touch thrilled to her heart. “I will take care of her,” she said, “I promise, as if she was my sister. Do you hear me now, Mrs Preston? I promise with all my heart. Oh, Pamela, I don’t think she hears me! I have said it too late—she is going to die!”

The doctor, who had spoken to Sara, came forward and drew her softly from the bedside. “Take her away,” he said to Jack, who all this while had been looking on. “Take them both away—they can do no good here——”

Sara, who was trembling in every limb, fell back upon her brother’s supporting arm; but when Jack held out his other hand to Pamela she made him no

reply. She was weaker than Sara, but she was a hundred times stronger. She gave him one pitiful look, and returned to her mother. That was her place, come what might; and she was so young, that even now she could not recognise that there was no hope.

Then Jack took his sister down-stairs. They went into the little parlour, which was full to his mind of so many associations. Sara had not, like Pamela, the support of intense and overwhelming emotion. She was shaken to the very depths by this extraordinary trial. As soon as it was over she fell into hysterical sobbing like a child. She could not restrain herself. She sank upon the little black sofa in the parlour, where Mrs Preston had so often rested, and hid her face in her hands to keep down as far as she could the irrepressible sobs. Jack had begun to walk about the room and seemed to take no notice; but he was thinking in his heart how small a matter it was to her in comparison with what it was to Pamela, though it was she and not Pamela who indulged in this show of sorrow. He was unkind to his sister; he was bitter against her, and against all the world. It was his natural charge that had been transferred to her hands; and who was Sara that she should have such a guardianship given to her? He vowed to himself that it was he

and only he who should take care of Pamela. Sara? a girl who knew nothing about it—a child with no power to take care of herself—the woman must be mad. He went to the door with a little excitement as the sound became audible of other people coming down-stairs. The spectators who had crowded into Mrs Preston's sick-room were being sent away, and old Betty, thus deprived of one source of interest, came in curtsying to make herself useful to Sara. "Poor soul, she's awful bad," said Betty; "but, Miss Sara, don't you take on; you've been a comfort to her. She's a deal easier in her mind; she's found friends for her girl, as was always her great thought. Don't you take on——"

"Oh, Betty, is she dead?" cried Sara, to whom the sympathy even of this old woman was a consolation, excited as she was.

"No, Miss," said Betty, shaking her head. "It ain't so easy getting shut o' this life. She ain't dead, nor won't be not yet awhile—judging by all as I've seen in my day."

"Then she is getting better," cried Sara, clasping her hands. "Oh, Jack, thank God! she is going to live."

Old Betty again shook her head. "Miss Sara, you're young," she said; "you don't know no better. She ain't a-going to live. But them things take

more nor a minute. This world had need to be a better place than it is to most on us ; for it's hard work a-getting in, and it's harder work a-getting out. She may lie like that for days and days. Most folks get to be glad at last when it's over. It's weary work, both for them as is nursin' and them as is dyin' ; but it's what we all has to go through," said Betty, with a conventional sigh.

This time, however, Betty, with all her experience, was not a true prophet. The strength of the dying woman was fictitious. As soon as she had got beyond the point at which her mind could still work, her body went down like so much dead weight ; consciousness and intelligence had failed her while Sara was in the act of making her promise, and in a few minutes the Rector, excited and rather angry, joined the others down-stairs. " You should have waited, Sara," he said, severely ; " no worldly affairs could be so important as to justify—— And then what can you do for the poor girl ? I would humour the fancies of the dying as much as any one ; but if the poor thing is left destitute, unless you take her into your service——"

" Mr Hardcastle," exclaimed Jack, furious, " do you know whom you are speaking of ? Miss Preston is my betrothed wife."

The Rector fell back in dismay for a moment.

Then he recovered himself with a certain dignity. "My dear Jack," he said, "this is not a moment to discuss any act of youthful folly. Your good father ought to know of this. Don't, I beg of you—don't say anything more to me."

"And all that we have in the world belongs to Pamela," said Sara, with a sigh. Mr Hardcastle looked at the brother and sister, and his usual discrimination forsook him. He thought they were both out of their senses. As there was nobody else to communicate with, he looked round at old Betty, who stood listening eagerly; and Betty, too, elevated her eyebrows, and shook her head. Were they going mad? Was there some idiocy in the air which affected everybody? The Rector went to the window, and turned his back upon them, and looked out in his bewilderment. He felt very sorry for poor Mr Brownlow. Then he seemed to get a glimmering of the meaning of it all. It was for Sara's aid in securing this marriage that the poor creature upstairs had been so anxious. Her mind had been passionately occupied about merely worldly interests to the last; and for this he and his higher consolation had been thrust away. Poor Brownlow! Mr Hardcastle thought of his own dutiful Fanny, who never gave way to any vagaries. And he buttoned his coat with a friendly instinct. "I am going to

see your father, as I can be of no further use here," he said ; and there was a world of disapproval in his tone.

But just then there were some hurried movements above, and a cry. It was Pamela, who was calling on her mother, appealing to an ear which no longer heard. They all knew instinctively what it meant. Sara started up, trembling and clasping her hands. She had never been in the same house with death before—never that she knew of ; and a dreadful sense that Mrs Preston had suddenly become a spiritual presence, and was everywhere about her, seized upon the girl. " I promise," she said, wildly, with lips that gave forth very little sound. As for Jack, he too started as if something had struck him. He went up to his sister, though he had been angry with her, and took her into his arms for a moment. " Sara, go to her," he said. He forgot all about secondary things—his heart bled for his Pamela. " Go to her !" he cried ; and something like a sob came from his breast. Not for the poor soul that was gone—not for her to whom at last the trouble and toil were over ; for the young creature who remained behind to profit by all the mother's unrewarded pains—for the living, not for the dead.

The doctor came down-stairs shortly after ; and though he was grave, there was a professional tone

about him which dispelled the awe of the group below. "It is all over," he said, "and a very good thing too for that poor girl. She could not have stood it much longer. I am very glad Miss Brownlow has gone to her. It's excessively good of your sister. I was obliged to interfere, you know. Nobody need hold themselves bound, unless they please, by a promise extorted like that ; but in such a case one never can tell what might have happened. The patient must be humoured. I feared——"

"No more," said Jack—"don't say any more ; you did what was quite right. It is Miss Preston who must be considered now. Could she be removed at once ? Would it be safe to take her away at once ?—for my sister, of course, I mean."

"Miss Preston?" said the doctor, a little puzzled. "Oh, the daughter, you mean, poor thing ! It would be the very best plan to take her away ; but she is a good little thing, and she wouldn't go."

"Never mind your opinion of her," cried Jack, keeping his temper with difficulty. "Tell me if we can take her away?"

"She will not go," said the doctor, offended in his turn. "As for opinions, I have a right to my opinion if she was the Queen. She's not the sort of girl to be taken away. After the funeral, it may be done, perhaps. Good morning. I shall see her to-morrow."

Mr Hardcastle, if you like I can set you down at the Rectory—I am going that way.”

“Thanks, I have to go somewhere else first,” said the Rector; and the other parish functionary departed accordingly, going softly for the first dozen steps out of respect for the dead. Then Mr Hardcastle put on his hat, and looked at Jack.

“I am going to Brownlows,” he said. “I am very sorry to have such an office to fulfil; but your father must know, Jack, what has been going on here to-day.”

Jack was in no merry mood, but he was unable to retain a short hard laugh, which relieved him as well as any other expression of feeling. “Yes, you are free to tell him,” he said, and he felt disposed to laugh again loudly when he looked at the Rector’s severe and disapproving face. It gave him a certain cynical and grim amusement to see it. How blind and stupid everybody was! What immovable, shallow dolts, to look on at all those mysteries of death and ruin, and never to be a whit the wiser! He could have laughed, but his laughter, such as it was, was internal—that too might be misunderstood. He waved old Betty impatiently away, and he turned his back on Mr Hardcastle who was going. When he turned round again both were gone. He even paused to think they were not so unlike each other; Betty



perhaps, on the whole, had most understanding of the two. He went to the window and watched the old woman cross reluctantly to the lodge, and the Rector enter the avenue. Betty, however, could not stay away. She came stealing back again, not perceiving Jack, looking cautiously round to make sure that both the Rector and the doctor were out of sight. She stopped to speak to the neighbour who was at her door, and they shook their heads over the sad story, and then Betty crept into Mrs Swayne's cottage and stole up-stairs. Jack took the pains to watch all this, but it was not because he was interested in old Betty. He was reluctant to go back to his own thoughts—to face the situation in which he found himself. When he could delay no longer, he sat down at the table as if he had work to do, and buried his head in his hands. Yes, she was dead, poor woman! The fortune which had excited her almost to madness, which had changed her from a humble, tender creature anxious to serve everybody, into an elated tyrant eager to tramp the world under foot, had never reached her grasp. Poor soul! At the very last moment of her life to undergo this awful temptation and to fall under it, and give the lie to all her dutiful and pious existence! Instead of pondering over his own difficulty, these were the reflections in which Jack's mind plunged itself. She had

gone where money could do her no good, and yet at the very end she had agitated and even stained her spotless life for it, leaving painful recollections behind her, though she had been a good woman; perhaps even shortening her own days. What a hard fate it was! how cruel to have had the irresistible temptation so late, and to have no time left her to efface the recollection of her momentary frenzy. Jack's heart grew soft towards her as it all came before him. Poor soul! Poor woman! not time even to say her prayers and ask God's pardon before she died; perhaps, however, on the whole, though Mr Hardcastle might be of a different opinion, God, who knew all, was less likely to be deceived by that ebullition than man. When he tried to think of his own course of action at this difficult moment, his mind went off at a tangent. It was in vain that he attempted to consider what he was to do. The quiet of death had fallen over the agitated house in which he sat, and his own agitation died out in that chilly calm. Then he got up with a kind of dull composure in his mind to go home. Everything must be postponed now until the few first days of darkness were over. It was the only tribute that could be paid to the dead.

Before he went away Sara came to him for a moment. Her eyes were red with crying, but she had

recovered herself. "Tell papa I must stay with her," said Sara. "I cannot leave her. I don't think she could have borne it much longer, and there is only me to take care of her now."

"You? to take care of her?" cried Jack. "How long is this folly to last? Am not I to see her?" and then his flash of resentment died away. "Sara, if you are not good to her, tender to her!" he said, with tears coming into his eyes in spite of him. "And she so young! not much more than a child. Why can't I bring down the carriage for her, and take her home?"

"And leave her mother here!" said Sara, turning away with the impatience of excitement. As for Jack, he was walking about in the passage while she spoke to him from the stair. He could have cried like one of the girls—he could have taken his sister in his arms, or have stormed at her. A hundred contradictory contending feelings were in his heart.

"Her mother is dead," he said. "What good can she do here now? why can't you show her the reason of it? she would be much better at Brownlows. The doctor said so. She will come with you."

"Never while her mother lies there," cried Sara—"her poor mother who loved her so! I know what is in her heart; and she shall do as she pleases. Tell papa, unless he wants me, that I must stay here."

And she stayed, and Jack went up the avenue alone. He met two carriages coming down, and had to stop and tell why he had not been present to say good-bye, and what had detained Sara. The ladies in the carriages stared very strangely at his few brief words of apology. And they gazed at each other in consternation as they passed on. It might be very good of Sara to go and watch by a sickbed, but to leave her guests for it, to let them all depart without a word, as if it had been a hotel—— Altogether it was a strange family. Mr Brownlow had told them he expected to be ruined, though there was no visible appearance of it. And Sara had rushed away from them, from the head of the table without a word, on the very last day, to attend a poor woman's deathbed. Not very much like Sara, they said ; and they began to give each other significant looks, and to ask, if the Brownlows had "anything wrong" in their blood. They were so new as a county family. People had no information about their grandfathers and grandmothers ; but they looked as if they were all mad—that was the fact. It was the strangest way to treat their guests.

And there were some of the guests, as Jack found on returning to the house, who were not going to leave till the next day. They were sulky and offended, as was natural. To make arrangements

for a pleasant visit, and to be all but turned out before the time you had yourself fixed—and then to have your mind confused by vague stories about ruin and loss, and somebody who was dying! It was not to be supposed that any one could be pleased. Mr Hardcastle had been there, and he had not mended matters. He had told one or two men how sorry he was for poor Brownlow—how he feared Jack had got entangled somehow, and had been so foolish as to involve his sister—and how things were in a bad way. All sorts of vague rumours were floating about the house—the servants were prepared for anything, from the reduction of their wages to the arrest of their master. They watched the door anxiously, and cast furtive looks down the avenue, that they might not be taken unprepared; and Mr Willis secretly removed a good deal of the plate into a dark corner of the wine-cellar. “Master might want it,” he said to himself—judging it not off the cards that master might be obliged to run away, and might be glad of a silver teapot or so to pay his expenses.

How they could have got through the evening it is impossible to tell, had not Sara appeared before dinner, very pale, with red eyes, and a melancholy face. Everybody rushed at her when she appeared—in a kind of consternation. And for a moment it

seemed to both her father and brother that their adversary had come alive, and that the struggle was to begin again. Sara's explanation, however, was the simple one that Pamela had fallen asleep, and that she had thought they would want her at home for dinner. So she went and dressed herself, like a martyr, and carried them through the embarrassed meal. It was she upon whom the chief burden fell, and she took up the weight and carried it without flinching. So the long confused eventful day came to an end. When it was late and all the bewildered people had retired to their rooms, Mr Brownlow and Jack took her down the avenue, guarding her tenderly, one on either side. There was little said between them, but their hearts were full—a kind of gratitude, a kind of sorrow, a certain pervading sense of union and sympathy had come into their minds; and the two men regarded with a half wondering, half pitying enthusiasm, a waking up of all the springs of natural love, the soft creature between them, the indulged, petted, faulty girl who now had everything to do. They both kissed her when they left her, with an overflowing of their hearts, and stood and looked at the dark cottage with the faint lights in its windows, saying nothing. In the upper window was the dim glow of the light in the chamber of the dead—the needless pathetic glimmer

which shone faintly over the covered face and closed eyes ; below, in the little parlour, where a bed had been hastily prepared for her, Pamela was sleeping in her profound exhaustion, almost as pale as her mother, shaded from the dim candlelight. The father and son did not speak, but they grasped each other's hands closely as they looked at the house, and turned away and walked home in silence. A certain confusion, consolation, and calm, all mingled with wonder and suspense, had come over them—words were of no use at that moment. And Sara went in and took up her guardianship—and slept and waked and watched all night long in the weakness and strength of her youth.

## CHAPTER XLIII.

### THE LIGHT OF COMMON DAY.

NEXT morning Mr Brownlow resumed his regular habits, and went down to the office, reassuring the household a little by this step, which seemed a return to ordinary life. He looked wistfully and with a certain solemnity at the closed windows of Mrs Swayne's cottage as he passed. The chief point of interest to him was that Sara was there ; and yet it was impossible not to think at the same time of the woman who had crossed his path so fatally, and now had been taken out of his way. In one sense she was taken out of his way. It was not to be supposed that the lawyer could look at the situation in which he found himself with any sentimental or superlative resolutions. His mind was quieted out of all the terrors which had at first overwhelmed him. It was no longer ruin that stared him in the face. The mother could have exacted interest and




compound interest; the daughter, who was Jack's betrothed bride, could, of course, be dealt with in a different way. Jack's sense that he was no longer her lover, but the guardian of her interests—that his business was to win every penny of her fortune for her, and then leave her to its enjoyment—did not, of course, affect Mr Brownlow. He was thinking of nothing fantastical, nothing exaggerated. Pamela was Jack's betrothed. She was in Sara's guardianship. From this day he considered her as a member of his family; and after all the troubles he had undergone, this solution on the whole seemed to Mr Brownlow a very easy, a very seemly and becoming one. She should have, as Jack's wife, her mother's fifty thousand pounds; and when he himself died, everything except a moderate portion for Sara should go into his son's hands. It was an arrangement which made his heart ache; for Sara would have to come down from all her grandeur, to become only what her father's daughter had a right to be in the Masterton house, to have but a humble provision made for her, and to relinquish all her luxurious habits and ambitions. If it had been Jack upon whom such a necessity had fallen, Mr Brownlow could have borne it; but Sara! Nevertheless it was just and right and necessary. There was nothing else to be done, nothing else to be thought of. And

both Sara and her father would have to submit, unless, indeed, Sir Charles Motherwell—— Mr Brownlow's eye kindled a little as he thought of his late visitor, and then he shook his head sadly in a kind of self-communing. If anything had come of that, could Sara have been silent on the subject? Would Sir Charles himself have gone away without a sign? Yet every moment since then had been so full of excitement and occupation, that he still retained a hope. In the midst of the awe and agitation attending Mrs Preston's death his child could scarcely have paused to tell him of a love-tale. When he entered the familiar office and saw everything going on just as it had done, Mr Brownlow felt like a man fallen from the skies. It seemed to him years since he had been there, and he could not but feel a thrill of wonder to find all his papers in their places, and to listen to Mr Wrinkell's questions about business matters which seemed to have stood still while his own destiny was getting decided. "Are you still at that point?" he said, almost peevishly. "I should have thought that would have been decided long ago."

"It is only three days, if you recollect, since I consulted you about it," Mr Wrinkell replied, with offended dignity, "and you gave me no distinct answer." Only three days! It might have

been three centuries, for anything Mr Brownlow knew.

Then he sat down at his desk and addressed himself very heartily to his business. A mass of work had accumulated of course, and he took it up with an energy he had not felt for ages. He had been working in the dark all this time, working languidly, not knowing who might be the better for it. Now his whole soul was in his occupation; every additional shilling he could make would be so much for his child. More and more as he became accustomed to the thought, his mind cleared, and courage and steadiness returned to him. It was true that he was at the age when men think of retiring from work, but he was a strong and vigorous man still, in possession of all his powers. Jack would withdraw, would marry, would enter on his independent career, and carry out probably the very programme his father had drawn out for him before that midnight visitor arrived whose appearance had changed everything. Poor creature, after all she had not changed everything. She had changed but little. Sara only had lost by her appearance. That was the sting of the whole matter; and Mr Brownlow applied himself with double energy, with the eager impulse and vigour of a young man, to the work before him. Everything he could add to his store would be the



better for Sara, and he felt that this was motive sufficient for any man worthy of the name.

When it came to be time for luncheon he went out—not to refresh himself with food, for which he had little appetite, but to make a visit which perhaps was a kind of ill-natured relief to him amid the pressure of his many thoughts. He went to Mrs Fennell's lodgings to pay one of his generally unwilling but dutiful visits. This time he was not unwilling. He went with an unaffected quietness which was very different from the forced calm of his last appearance there. Mrs Fennell was seated as usual in her great chair, but she had not on her best cap, and was accordingly cowed and discouraged to begin with; and Nancy, who was with her, made a pretence of leaving the room. "Stay," said Mr Brownlow, "I want you. It is best that you too should hear what I am going to say."

"At your service, sir," said Nancy, dropping him a defiant curtsy. As for Mrs Fennell, she had begun to tremble immediately with excitement and curiosity.

"What is it, John Brownlow?" she said. "What's happened? It's a sight to see you so soon again. It isn't for nothing, we may be sure. What do you want of me and Nancy now?"

"I want nothing of you," said Mr Brownlow. "I

came to tell you of something you ought to know. Phoebe Thomson is found, Mrs Fennell. She came to me the other night."

"Good Lord!" cried the old woman; and then a wild light got up in her eyes, and she looked at him fiercely. "Came to you?—and you let her come, and let her go, and owned her, you coward! Tell me next you have given her up the children's money—my Bessie's children! That's what you call a man! Oh, good Lord—good Lord! You owned her, and you tell it to my very face!"

Then there was a little pause. The two old women looked at him, one with impotent fury, the other with suppressed exultation. "I always said so!" said Nancy. His simple words had produced effect enough, if that was what he wanted. He looked at them both, and a faint smile came over his face, a smile in which there was no mirth and which lasted but a moment. He felt ashamed of himself next minute that he could have been tempted to smile.

"John Brownlow," said Mrs Fennell, rising in her exasperation, "I'm an old poor failing woman, and you're a fine strong man, but I'd have fought different for my Bessie's children. Didn't I tell you she came to me, that you might be on your guard? And you a lawyer! Oh, good Lord—good Lord! I'd have kept it safer for them if it had been me. I'd

have turned her out of my door for an impostor and a vagabond! I'd have hunted her to death first if it had been me. And you to tell me her name clean out as quiet as a judge and look me in the face! Oh you coward! you poor creature! Never, if she had torn me with wild horses, would she have got it out of me!"

"He could not have acted different," said Nancy, with suppressed excitement. "Sit down, mistress, or you'll do yourself a harm. The best lawyer in the world couldn't turn a woman away as knowed her rights."

Mr Brownlow held up his hand to prevent the angry exclamation that was on Mrs Fennell's lips. "Hush," he said, "my story is not done. It is a very sad story. Poor soul, she will never get much good of the money. Phoebe Thomson is dead."

They both turned on him with a look which all his life he never forgot. Would they themselves have been capable of such a deed? Was it the natural suggestion of the crisis? The look made him sick and faint. He turned so as to confront both the old women. "I don't know who her counsellor was," he said, with unconscious solemnity, "but it must have been some one who believed me a knave and a liar. Had she come to me and proved to me who she was, she might have been living now.

Poor soul, she did not do that. She was sent to London instead to find out for herself about her mother's will, and she came down in haste, finding there was not a moment to lose. And she was driven mad with fright and suspicion and fatigue; an old woman too—she could not bear it. And now, instead of enjoying what was hers, she is dead. This is what comes of evil counsel. She might have lived and had some comfort of her life had she been honest and straightforward and come to me."

Mr Brownlow said this with the conviction and fervour of an upright man. All the evil thoughts he had himself entertained, all his schemes to baffle his unknown adversary, had faded from his mind. It was not a fictitious but a real forgetfulness. He spoke in the superiority of high principle and of a character above reproach. He did not remember that he had tacitly conspired with Mrs Fennell, or that he had wilfully rejected the opportunity of finding Phoebe Thomson out after her visit to his mother-in-law. Perhaps his excuse to himself was that, at the moment, his suspicions were all directed to a wrong point. But I don't think he felt any occasion to excuse himself—he simply forgot. If she had lived she should have had all, every penny, though it cost him his ruin; and now she was dead by the visitation of God, and everything was changed. It

is strange and yet it was true. He looked at them both with a superiority which was not assumed, and he believed what he said.

As for his hearers, they were both stunned by this solemn address. Mrs Fennell dropped into her chair, and in her surprise and relief and consternation began to cry. As for Nancy, she was completely cowed and broken down for some minutes. It was she who had done all this, and every word told upon her. She was overwhelmed by Mr Brownlow's rectitude, by his honour and truth, which owing to her had been thus fatally distrusted. And she was struck at the same time by a cruel disappointment which gave force to every word. She stood and looked at Mr Brownlow, quailing before him. Then a faint gleam of returning courage came over her. She drew a deep breath to give herself the power of speech. "There is her child still," she said, with a gasp, and faced him with a certain bravado again.

"Ah, I see you know!" he said; "that is the strangest part of all. For a long time past, before we knew who they were, and much against my will, her child had taken Jack's fancy; he was determined to marry her, though I told him he should have nothing from me; now in the strange arrangements of Providence——" said Mr Brownlow. But there he stopped; something seemed to stifle him;



he could not go on speaking about the dispensations of Providence; he got up when he had reached this point, with a sudden sense that after all he had no right to speak as if God and himself—or Providence, as he preferred to say—were in partnership; his hands were not clean enough for that. He stopped, and asked after Mrs Fennell, if she had all the comforts she wanted, and then he made what haste he could away. He even felt half ashamed of himself as he went down-stairs. His mother-in-law, excited as she had been by the first piece of news he told her, had but half understood the second. He left her sobbing weakly over her Bessie's children who were being robbed and ruined. Nancy went to the door with him in a servile despair. She understood it all well enough. There was no more hope for her, no more dazzling expectations of such a retirement as Betty's lodge and its ease and independence. To serve old Mrs Fennell's whims all the rest of her days—to be pensioned on some pittance, or turned out upon the world for her misdeeds in her old age when Mrs Fennell should die—this was all that she had before her now.

When Mr Brownlow went back after having fulfilled this duty, he went up-stairs into the house instead of going to the office, and with a caprice which he himself scarcely understood, called Powys,

who was standing at the door, to follow him. It seemed to him as if, it was so long ago, Powys too must have recovered from his heartbreak. He took the young man with him over the silent, empty, echoing house. "This is where I began my married life," he said, stopping on the cold hearth in the drawing-room, and looking round him. It was a pretty old-fashioned room, running all the breadth of the house, with windows at each end, and a perpetual cross-light, pale at one side, rosy and full of sunshine at the other. It was not a lofty room, like the drawing-room at Brownlows, nor was it rich with gold and dainty colours; but yet there was something in the subdued tone of the old curtains, the old Turkey carpet, the japanned screens and little tables, the old-world look of everything, which was neither ungraceful nor unrefined. "I am coming back to live here," he said after an interval, with a sigh. He could not tell why he made this confidential communication to the young man, who grew pale, and gazed at him eagerly, and could not find a word to say in reply. Mr Brownlow was not thinking of Powys's looks, nor of his feelings; he was occupied with himself, as was natural enough. He took the young fellow into his confidence, if that could be called confidence, because he liked him, and had seen more of him than of anybody else

near. What the intelligence might be to Powys Mr Brownlow did not stop to think ; but he went over the house in his company, consulting him about the alterations to be made. Somehow he had returned to his first feeling towards Powys—he wanted to be kind to him, to make up to him for not being Phcebe Thomson's son ; they were fellow-sufferers so far as that was concerned—at least such was the feeling in Mr Brownlow's mind, though he could not well have explained how.

Later in the afternoon he had some visitors. Altogether it was an exciting day. The first who came to him was Sir Charles Motherwell, who had ridden in from Ridley, where he was staying, to see him, and whose appearance awoke a certain surprise and expectation in Mr Brownlow's mind ; he thought Sara must have accepted him after all. But the Baronet's looks did not justify his hope ; Sir Charles was very glum, very rueful, and pulled at his mustache more than ever. He came in and held out his hand, and put down his hat, and then pulled off his gloves and threw them into it, as if he were about to perform some delicate operation. When he had got through all these ceremonies, he sank into the chair which stood ready for Mr Brownlow's clients, and heaved a profound sigh.

"I thought I'd come and tell you," he said, "though it ain't pleasant news; I tried my luck, as I said I would—not that I've got any luck. She—she—wouldn't hear of it, Brownlow. I'd have done anything in the world she liked to say—you know I would; she might have sold the old place, or done what she pleased; but she wouldn't, you know, not if I'd gone down on my knees—it was all of no use." He had never uttered so many sentences all on end in his life before, poor fellow. He got up now, and walked as far as the office wall would let him, and whistled dolefully, and then he returned to his chair, and breathed another deep sigh. "It was all of no use."

"I am very sorry," said Mr Brownlow—"very sorry; she would have chosen a good man if she had chosen you; but you know I can't interfere."

"Do you think I want any one to interfere?" said Sir Charles, with momentary resentment. "Look here, Brownlow, I'll tell you how it is; she said she liked some one else better than me—I'd like to wring the fellow's neck!" said the disappointed lover, with a little outburst; "but if there's money, or anything in the way, I thought I might lend him a hand—not in my own name, you know. I suppose a girl ain't the master to like whom she ought to like, no more than I am," said Sir Charles,

disconsolately, "but she's got to be given in to, Brownlow. I'd lend him a hand, if that was what was wanting. As long as she's happy and has her way, a man can always pull through."

Mr Brownlow started a little at this strange speech, but in the end the confused generosity of the speaker carried him out of himself. "You are a good fellow, Motherwell," he said, heartily, holding out his hand—"you are the best fellow I know."

"Ah, so she said," said poor Sir Charles, with a hoarse little laugh—he was not bright, poor fellow, but he felt the sarcasm; "I'd a deal rather she had praised me less and liked me more——"

And he ended with another big sigh. Mr Brownlow had to make himself very uncomfortable by way of discouraging Sir Charles's generousities. He had to protest that he knew no one whom Sara could prefer. He had to say at last peremptorily that it was a matter which he could not discuss, before his anxious and melancholy visitor could be got rid of. It was not a pleasant thought to Mr Brownlow. He did not like to hear of Sara preferring any man. He could have given her to Charley Motherwell, who would have been her slave, and could have assured her position, and endowed her with a title such as it was; but Sara in love was not an idea pleasant to her

father, besides the uneasy wonder who could be the object of her preference. He tried to go back and recollect, but his memory failed him. Then there came a dim vision to his mind of a moment when his child had turned from him—when she had wept and rejected his embrace and his sympathy. How long was that ago? But he did not seem able to tell. It was before—that was all he knew. Everything had happened *since*. He had told her she was free, and she had turned upon him and upbraided him—for what? Years seemed to lie between him and that half-forgotten scene. He tried in vain to resume the thread of his plans and arrangements. In spite of himself his reluctant yet eager thoughts kept going back and back to that day. How long was it since he had thought Powys the heir? How long since the moment of unlooked-for blessedness when he believed himself free? It was on that day that Sara had turned from him and cried—that day when he was so full of comfort, so anxious to show his gratitude to God—when he had drawn that cheque for the Masterton charities, which—by the way, how had he distributed the money? Catching at this point of circumstance, Mr Brownlow made an effort to escape from his recollections. He did not want to recall that foolish premature delight.

It might have been years ago, to judge by his feelings; but he knew that could not be the case. It had become late in the afternoon by this time, and the clerks were mostly gone. There was nobody whom he could ask what had been done about the cheque for the charities; and he had just drawn towards him the despatch-box with his papers which had been brought from Brownlows with him, to ascertain for himself, when the office-boy came pulling his forelock to ask if he would see a lady who was waiting? Mr Brownlow said No, at first, for it was past office hours; and then he said Yes, no longer feeling any tremor at the prospect of a strange visitor. He could believe it was a simple client now, not a messenger of fate coming to ruin and betray, as for a long time he had been in the way of feeling. Such ease of mind would be cheaply purchased even with fifty thousand pounds. The lady came in accordingly, and Mr Brownlow received her with his usual courtesy, which was, however, a little disturbed when he looked at her. Not that he had any real occasion to be disturbed. A far-off flutter of his past anxieties, a kind of echo, came over him at the sight of her pleasant homely face. He had thought she was Phoebe Thomson the last time he had seen her. He had shrunk from her,

and lost his self-possession altogether. Even now a minute had elapsed before he could quite command himself, and remember the real condition of affairs.

"Good day, Mrs Powys," he said; "I am sorry to have kept you waiting. Why did not you send me word who it was?"

"I thought you might have been engaged, sir," said Mrs Powys; "I wasn't sure if you would remember me, Mr Brownlow. I came to you once before, when I was in trouble, and you were very kind—too kind," she added, with a sigh. "No, no; it is not the same thing. If my poor boy has troubles still, he does not hide his heart from me now."

"That is well," said Mr Brownlow, coldly. He thought some appeal was going to be made to him on behalf of Powys and his folly. Though he was in reality fond of Powys, he stiffened instinctively at the thought. "It is growing late," he went on; "I was just going. Is there anything in which I can be of use to you?" He laid his hand on his despatch-box as he spoke. His manner had been very different when he was afraid of her; and yet he was not unkind or unreasonable. She was his clerk's mother; he would have exerted himself, and done much to secure the family any real benefit;



but he did not mean that they should thrust themselves into his affairs.

"It is something my poor boy didn't like to ask," said Mrs Powys, with a little timidity. "He had offended you that day, or he thought he had offended you; and he would not do anything to bring it back to your mind. I am sure if he went wrong, Mr Brownlow, he didn't mean to—— There's nothing in this world he would not do for you."

"Went wrong—offended me?" said Mr Brownlow; "I don't think he ever offended me. What is it he wants? There are certain subjects which I cannot enter upon either with him or you——"

"Oh, not that—not that," said Mrs Powys, with tears. "If he's been foolish he's punished for it, my poor boy! And he would not ask you for his papers, not to bring it back to your mind. 'Mother,' he said, 'he's worried, and I can't vex him.' He would lose all his own hopes for that. But I'm his mother, Mr Brownlow. I have a feeling for my son's interests as you have for yours. His papers, poor boy, are no good to you."

"His papers?" said Mr Brownlow, with amaze, looking at her. For the moment his old confusion of mind came back to him; he could not quite feel yet that Powys's papers could be innocent of all reference to himself.

"My poor husband's letters, sir," said Mrs Powys, drying her eyes; "the papers he took to you when he thought——; but that is neither here nor there. I've found my poor Charley's mother, Mr Brownlow; she's living, though she's an old woman. I have been tracing it out to the best of my ability, and I've found her. Likely enough she'll have nothing to say to me. I am but a poor woman, never brought up to be a lady; but it's different with my boy."

"Ah, his papers!" said Mr Brownlow. This, too, belonged to his previous stage of existence. It was clear that he had to be driven back to that day of vain terror and equally vain relief. It came back to him now in every particular—the packet he had found on his writing-table; his long confused poring over it; his summons to Powys in the middle of the night, and discovery of the mistake he had been making; even the blue dawn of the morning through the great window in the staircase as he went up to bed, a man delivered. All this rushed back on his memory. He took his keys and opened the despatch-box, which he had been about to open when Mrs Powys came in. Probably the papers would be there. He began even to recollect what these papers were as he opened the box. "So you have found your husband's family?" he said; "I hope they are in a position to help you. I

should be very glad to hear that, for your son's sake."

"You are very kind, Mr Brownlow," said Mrs Powys. "I have found my poor Charley's mother. She's old now, poor lady, and she's lost all her children: and at long and last she's bethought herself of us, and wrote a letter to Canada to inquire. I got it sent on this morning—only this morning. I don't know what she can do for my boy; but she's Lady Powys, and that counts for something here."

"Lady Powys?" cried Mr Brownlow, looking up with a handful of papers in his hand, and struck with consternation. "She used to live near Master-ton; if you knew she was your husband's mother, why did not you apply to her before? Are you sure you are making no mistake? Lady Powys! I had no idea your relations were——"

"My husband was a gentleman, sir," said Mrs Powys, proudly. "He gave up his friends and his family, poor fellow, for me. I don't pretend I was his equal—and it might have been better for him if he'd thought more of himself; but he was always known for a gentleman wherever he went; and my boy is his father's son," said the proud mother. She would have been glad to humble the rich lawyer who had sent her boy away from his house, and forbidden him, tacitly at least, his daughter's presence.

"We did not know that his grandmamma was a lady of title," she added, with candour. "My poor Charley used to say it was in the family; but his folks have come to it, poor fellow, since his time."

"Lady Powys!" Mr Brownlow said to himself, with a curious confusion of thoughts. He knew Lady Powys well enough, poor old woman. She had accumulated a ghostly fortune by surviving everybody that belonged to her. He remembered all about her, and the look of scared dismay and despair that came into her eyes as death after death among her own children made her richer, and left her more desolate. And what if this was an heir for her—this young fellow whom he had always liked even in spite of himself? He had always liked him. He was glad to remember that. He sought out his papers with his heart softening more and more. Lady Powys's grandson was a very different person from his nameless Canadian clerk.

"Here they are," he said. "I have been much occupied, and I have never had time to look at them; but I am very glad to hear you have friends who can be of use to you. I know Lady Powys. You should send your boy to her; that would be the best way. And, by the by, he told me your name was Christian. If you are the same as I suppose, we are a kind of connections too."

Mrs Powys was so utterly amazed by this statement, that Mr Brownlow had to enter deeply into details to satisfy her. Possibly he would not have mentioned it at all but for Lady Powys. Such inducements work without a man being aware of them. He said afterwards, and he believed, that his reference to the family connection between them was drawn out "in the course of conversation." When she went away, he felt as if there could never cease to be something extraordinary raining down upon him out of heaven. Lady Powys! that was different. And before he closed his despatch-box, he looked at his cheque-book which was there, to see if there were any particulars about the charities on the counterfoil. The first thing that met his eyes was the cheque itself left there, never so much as torn out of the book; and, could it be possible, good heavens! it was dated only four days before? When he had mastered this astonishing fact, Mr Brownlow paused over it a minute, and then tore it into little pieces with a sigh. He could not afford such benefactions now.

## CHAPTER XLIV.

### PAMELA'S MIND.

THE Brownlow family scarcely met again until after Mrs Preston's funeral. Sara did not even attempt to leave her forlorn charge, or to bring her away from Mrs Swayne's on the funeral-day. On the first dreary night after all was over, the two girls sat alone in the darkened rooms, and clung to each other. Poor little Pamela had no more tears to shed. She looked like the shadow of herself, a white transparent creature, fragile as a vision. She had no questions to ask, no curiosity about anything. She was willing that Sara should arrange and decide, and take everything upon herself. She did not care to know, or even seem to remember, the mysteries her mother had talked of on her deathbed. When Sara began to explain to her, Pamela had stopped the explanation. She had grown pale and faint, and begged that she might hear no more.

"I don't want to know," she cried hoarsely, with a kind of sick horror; "if you knew how it changed her, Sara! Oh, if you knew what she used to be!" And then she would burst into fits of sobbing, which shook her delicate frame. It had changed her tender mother into a frantic woman. It had clouded and obscured her at the end, and made her outset on that last lonely journey such a one as Pamela could not dwell upon. And there was nobody but Pamela who would ever know how different she had once been—how different all her life had been to these few days or weeks. Accordingly the poor child allowed herself to be guided as Sara pleased, and obeyed her, to spare herself an explanation. She went into the carriage next morning without a word, and was driven up the avenue to the great house which she had once entered as a humble visitor, and from which she had been so long absent. Now she entered it in very different guise, no longer stealing up the stairs to Sara's room, to wait for her young patroness there. It was she now who was everybody's chief object. Mr Brownlow himself came to meet her, and lifted her out of the carriage, and kissed her on the forehead like a father. He said, "My poor child!" as he looked at her white little face. And Jack stood behind watching. She saw him and everything round her as in a dream. She did not seem to

herself to have any power of independent speech or movement. When she tried to make a step forward, she staggered and trembled. And then all at once, for one moment everything grew clear to Pamela, and her heart once more began to beat. As she made that faltering uncertain step forward, and swayed as if she would have fallen, Jack rushed to her side. He did not say a word, poor fellow; he too had lost his voice—but he drew her arm through his, and pressed it trembling to his side, and led her into the place that was to be her home. It was all clear for a moment, and then it was all dark, and Pamela knew no more about it until she woke up some time later and found herself lying on a sofa in a large, lofty, quiet room. She woke up to remember her troubles anew, and to feel all afresh as at the first moment, but yet her life was changed. Her heart was wounded and bleeding with more than mere natural grief—she was alone in the world. Yet there was a certain sweetness—a balm in the air—a soothing she knew not what or how. He had carried her there, and laid her down out of his arms, and kissed her in her swoon, with an outburst of love and despair. It seemed to him as if he ought to leave her, and go away and be seen no more—but yet he was not going to leave her. His principles and his pride gave way in one instant before her



wan little face. How could any man with a heart in his breast desert such a tender fragile creature in the moment of her necessity? Jack went out and wandered about the woods after that, and spoke to nobody. He began to see, after all, that a man cannot arbitrarily decide on his own conduct; that, in fact, a hundred little softenings or hardenings, a multitude of unforeseen circumstances are always coming in. And he ventured to make no new resolutions; only time could decide what he was to do.

When Pamela had rested for a few days, and regained her self-command, and become capable of looking at the people who surrounded her, Mr Brownlow, who considered an explanation necessary, called together a solemn meeting of everybody concerned. It was Sara's desire too, for Sara felt the responsibilities of her guardianship great, and was rather pleased that they should be recognised. They met round the fire in the drawing-room, as Pamela was not able yet to go down-stairs. Mr Brownlow's despatch-box, in which he had kept his papers lately, was brought up and put on the table; and Jack was there, not sitting with the rest, but straying about the other end of the room in an agitated way, looking at the pictures, which he knew by heart. He had scarcely exchanged a word with Pamela since she came to Brownlows. They

had never seen each other alone. It was what he had himself thought proper and necessary under the circumstances, but still it chafed him notwithstanding. Pamela sat by the fire in her deep mourning, looking a little more like herself. Her chair was close to the bright fire, and she held out her hands to it with a nervous shiver. Sara too was in a black dress, and stood on the other side, looking down with a certain affectionate importance upon her ward. She was very sorry for Pamela, and deeply aware of the change which had taken place in the circumstances of all the party. But Sara was Sara still. She was very tender, but she was important. She felt the dignity of her position; and she did not mean that any one should forget how dignified and authoritative that position was.

"Papa, I have brought Pamela as you told me," said Sara; "but there must not be too much said to her. She is not strong enough yet. Only what is indispensable must be said."

"I will try not to weary her," said Mr Brownlow, and then he went to Pamela's side in his fatherly way, and took one of her chilly little hands. "My dear," he said, "I have some things to speak of that must be explained to you. You must know clearly why you have been brought here, and what are your prospects, and the connection between us. You have

been very brave, and have trusted us, and I thank you ; but you must hear how it is. Tell me if I tire you ; for I have a great deal to say."

" Indeed I am quite content, quite content ! " cried Pamela ; " why should you take all this trouble ? You brought me here because you are very kind. It is I who have to thank you."


" That is what she wants to think," said Sara. " I told her we were not kind, but she will not believe me. She prefers her own way."

" Oh, please ! " said poor little Pamela ; " it is not for my own way. If you liked me, that would be the best. Yes, that was what I wanted to think——"

She broke off faltering, and Jack, who had been at the other end of the room, and whom her faint little voice could not have reached, found himself, he did not know how, at the back of her chair. But he did not speak—he could not speak, his lips were sealed.

" You must not be foolish, Pamela," said her guardian, solemnly ; " of course we love you, but that has nothing to do with it. Listen to papa, and he will tell you everything. Only let me know when you are tired."

Then Mr Brownlow tried again. " You are quite right," he said, soothing the trembling girl ; " in every case this house would have been your proper



shelter. Do you know you are Sara's cousin, one of her relations? Perhaps that will be a comfort to you. Long ago, before you were born, your grandmother, whom you never saw, made a will, and left her money to me in trust for your mother. My poor child! She is not able to be spoken to yet."


"Oh no, I am not able—I will never be able!" cried Pamela, before any one else could interfere. "I don't want ever to hear of it. Oh, Mr Brownlow, if I am Sara's cousin, let me stay with her, and never mind any more. I don't want any more."

"But there must be more, my dear child," said Mr Brownlow, again taking her cold little hand into his. "I will wait, if you prefer it, till you are stronger. But we must go through this explanation, Pamela, for everybody's sake. Would you rather it should be on another day?"

She paused before she answered, and Sara, who was watching her, saw, without quite understanding, a pathetic appealing glance which Pamela cast behind her. Jack would have understood, but he did not see. And though he was still near her, he was not, as he had been for a moment, at the back of her chair. Pamela paused as if she were waiting for help. "If there was any one you could say it to for me——" she said, hesitating; and then the sudden tears came dropping over her white cheeks. "I for-

got I was alone and had nobody," she continued, in a voice which wrung her lover's heart. "I will try to listen now."

Then Mr Brownlow resumed. He told her the story of the money truly enough, and with hearty belief in his story, yet setting everything, as was natural, in its best light. He was not excusing himself, but he was unconsciously using all his power to show how naturally everything had happened, how impossible it was that he could have foreseen, and how anxious he had always been for news of the heir. It was skilfully told, and yet Mr Brownlow did not mean it to be skilful. Now that it was all over, he had forgotten many things that told against himself, and his narrative was not for Pamela only, but for his own children. His children listened with so great an interest that they did not for the moment observe Pamela. She sat with her hands clasped on her knees, bending forward towards the fire. She gave no sign of interest, but listened passively without a change on her face. She was going through an inevitable and necessary trial. That was all. Her thoughts strayed away from it. They strayed back into the beaten paths of grief; they strayed into wistful wonderings why Jack did not answer for her; why he did not assume his proper place, and act for her as he ought to do. Could he have changed?



Pamela felt faint and sick as that thought mingled with all the rest. But still she could bear it, whatever might be required of her. It was simply a matter of time. She would listen, but she had never promised to understand. Mr Brownlow's voice went on like the sound of an instrument in her ears. He was speaking of things she knew nothing about, cared nothing about. Jack would have understood, but Jack had not undertaken this duty for her. Even Sara, no doubt, would understand. And Pamela sat quiet, and looked as if she were listening. That was all that could be expected of her. At last there came certain words that roused her attention in spite of herself.


"My poor child, I don't want to vex you," Mr Brownlow said ; "if your mother had lived we should probably have gone to law, for she would have accepted no compromise, and I should have been obliged to defend myself. You inherit all her rights, but not her prejudices, Pamela. You must try to understand what I am saying. You must believe that I mean you well, that I will deal honourably with you. If she had done so, she might have been——"

Pamela started up to her feet, taking them all utterly by surprise. "I don't want to know anything about it," she cried. "Oh, you don't know, you don't know! It changed her so. She was never like that

before. She was as kind, and as tender, and as soft! There never was any one like her. You don't know what she was! It changed her. Oh, Jack," cried the poor girl, turning round to him and holding out her hands in appeal, "you can tell! She never was like that before. You know she never was like that before!"

Sara had rushed to Pamela's aid before Jack. She supported her in her arms, and did all she could to soothe her. "We know that," she said, with the ready unquestioning partisanship of a woman. "I can tell. I have seen her. Dear Pamela, don't tremble so. We were all fond of her; sit down and listen to papa."

Then poor Pamela sat down again to undergo the rest of her trial. She dried her eyes and grew dull and stupid in her mind, and felt the words flowing on without any meaning in them. She could bear it. They could not insist upon her understanding what they meant. When Mr Brownlow came to an end there followed a long pause. They expected she would say something, but she had nothing to say; her head was dizzy with the sound that had been in her ears so long. She sat in the midst of them, all waiting and looking at her, and was silent. Then Mr Brownlow touched her arm softly, and bent over her with a look of alarm in his eyes.



"Pamela," he said, "you have heard all? You know what I mean? My dear, have you nothing to say?"

Pamela sat upright and looked round the room, and shook off his hand from her arm. "I have nothing to say," she cried, with a petulant outburst of grief and wretchedness, "if *he* has nothing. He was to have done everything for me. He has said so hundreds and hundreds of times. But now—— And how can I understand? Why does not he speak and say he has given me up, if he has given me up? And what does it all matter to me? Let me go away."

"*I* give you up!" cried Jack. He made but one step to her from the other end of the room, and caught her as she turned blindly to the door. It was with a flush of passion and confusion that he spoke. "*I* give you up? Not for my life."

"Then why don't you speak for me, and tell them?" cried Pamela, with the heat of momentary desperation. Then she sank back upon his supporting arm. She had no need now to pretend to listen any longer. She closed her eyes when they laid her on the sofa, and laid down her head with a certain pleasant helplessness. "Jack knows," she said softly. It was to herself rather than to the others she spoke. But the words touched them all in the strangest



way. As for Jack, he stood and looked at her with an indescribable face. Man as he was, he could have wept. The petulance, the little outburst of anger, the blind trust and helplessness, broke up all the restraints in which he had bound himself. In a moment he had forgotten all his confused reasonings. Natural right was stronger than anything conventional. Of course it was he who ought to speak for her—ought to act for her. Sara's guardianship, somewhat to Sara's surprise, came to an instant and summary end.

Mr Brownlow was as much relieved as Pamela, and as glad as she was when the conference thus came to an end. He would have done his duty to her now in any circumstances, however difficult it might have been, but Jack's agency of course made everything easier. They talked it all over afterwards apart, without the confusing presence of the two girls; and Jack had his own opinions, his own ideas on that subject as on most others. It was all settled about the fifty thousand pounds, and the changed life that would be possible to the heiress and her husband. Jack's idea was, that he would take his little bride abroad, and show her everything, and accustom her to her altered existence, which was by no means a novel thought. And on his return he would be free to enter upon public life,

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or anything else he pleased. But he was generous in his prosperity. His sister had been preferred to him all his life—was she to be sacrificed to him now? He interfered—with that natural sense of knowing best, which comes so easily to a young man, and especially to one who has just had a great and unlooked-for success in the world—on Sara's behalf.

"I don't like to think of Sara being the sufferer," he said. "I feel as if Pamela was exacting everything, or I at least on her behalf. It would not be pleasant either for her or me to feel so. I don't think we are considering Sara as much as we ought."

Mr Brownlow smiled. He might have been offended had he not been amused. That any one should think of defending his darling from his thoughtlessness! "Sara is going with me," he said.

"But she cannot carry on the business," insisted Jack. "Pamela's claims are mine now. I am not going to stand by and see Sara suffer."

"She shall not suffer," said Mr Brownlow, with impatience; and he rose and ended the consultation. By degrees a new and yet an old device had stolen into his mind. He had repulsed and shut it out, but it had come back like a pertinacious fairy shedding a curious light over his path. He could

not have told whether he most liked or disliked this old-new thought. But he cherished it secretly, and never permitted himself to breathe a word about it to any one. And under its influence it began to seem possible to him that all might be for the best, as people say—that Brownlows might melt away like a vision and yet nobody suffer. Sara was going to Masterton with her father to the old house in which she was born. She had refused Sir Charles and his title, and all the honours and delights he could have given her. Perhaps another kind of reward which she could prize more might be awaiting her. Perhaps, indeed—it was just possible—she might like better to be happy and make everybody happy round her, than to have a fine house and a pair of greys. Mr Brownlow felt that such an idea was almost wicked on his part, but yet it would come, thrilling him with anticipations which were brighter than any visions he had ventured to entertain for many a long year. “Sara is going with me,” he said to everybody who spoke to him on the subject. And he grew a little irritated when he perceived the blank looks with which everybody received the information. He forgot that he had thought it the most dreadful downfall that could overwhelm him once. That was not his opinion now.

Brownlows lost its agitated aspect from the

moment when Mr Brownlow and Jack came out of the library, having finished their consultation. Jack went off, whistling softly, taking three steps at a time, to the drawing-room, where Pamela still lay on the sofa under Sara's care. Mr Brownlow remained down-stairs, but when he rang for lights the first glance at him satisfied Willis that all was right. Nothing was said, but everybody knew that the crisis was over; and in a moment everything fell, as if by magic, into its usual current. Willis went down to his cellar very quietly and brought the plate out of it, feeling a little ashamed of himself. And though the guests were dismissed, the house regained its composure, its comfort, and almost its gaiety. The only thing was that the family had lost a relation, whose daughter had come to live at Brownlows—and were in mourning accordingly,—a fact which prevented parties, or any special merry-making, when Christmas came.

Though indeed before Christmas came the little invalid of the party—she whom they all petted, and took care of—began to come out from behind the clouds with the natural elasticity of her youth. Pamela would shut herself up for a whole day now and then, full of remorse and compunction, thinking she had not enough wept. But she was only eighteen—her health was coming back to her—she


was surrounded by love and tenderness, and saw before her, daily growing brighter and brighter, all the promises and hopes of a new life. It was not in nature that sorrow should overcome all these sweet influences. She brightened like a star over which the clouds come and go, and every break shone sweeter, and got back the rose to her cheeks, and the light to her eyes. It was a pretty sight to watch her coming out of the shadows, and so Jack thought, who was waiting for her and counting the week. When the ice was bearing on Dewsbury Mere—which was rather late that year, for it was in the early spring that the frosts were hardest—he took her by the crisp frozen paths across the park to see the skaters. The world was all white, and Pamela stood in her mourning, distinct against the snow, leaning on Jack's arm. As they stood and looked on, the carrier's cart came lumbering along towards the Mere. Hobson walked before, cracking his whip, with his red comforter, which was very effective in the frosty landscape; and the breath of the horses rose like steam into the chill air. Pamela and Jack looked at each other. They said both together, "You remember?" Little more than a year before they had looked at each other then for the first time. The carrier's cart had been coming and going daily, and was no wonder to behold; and

Hobson could not have been more surprised had the coin spun down upon his head out of the open sky, than he was when Jack tossed a sovereign at him as he passed. "For bringing me my little wife," he said ; but this was not in Hobson's, but in Pamela's ear.

## CHAPTER XLV.

### THE LAST.

WITHIN six months all these changes had actually taken place, occasioning a greater amount of gossip and animadversion in the county than any other modern event has been known to do. Even that adventure of young Keppel of Ridley, when he ran away with the heiress, was nothing to it. Running away with heiresses, if you only can manage it, is a natural enough proceeding. But when a family melts somehow out of the position it has held for many years, and glides uncomplainingly into a different one, and gives no distinct explanation, the neighbourhood has naturally reason to feel aggrieved. There was nothing sudden or painful about the change. For half-a-year or so they all continued very quietly at Brownlows, seeing few people by reason of Pamela's mourning, yet not rejecting the civilities of their friends; and then Pamela and



Jack were married, notwithstanding her mourning. Nobody knew very distinctly who she was. It was a pretty name, people said, and not a common name—not like the name of a girl he had picked up in the village, as some others suggested; and if that had been the case, was it natural that his father and sister should have taken up his bride so warmly, and received her into their house? Yet why should they have received her into their house? Surely she must have some friends. When the astounding events which followed became known, the county held its breath, and not without reason. As soon as the stir of the wedding was over, and the young people departed, it became known suddenly one morning that Mr Brownlow and his daughter had driven down quietly in the carriage with the greys for the last time, and had settled themselves—heaven knew why!—in the house at Masterton for good. Brownlows was not to be sold: it was to be Jack's habitation when he came home, or in the mean time, while he was away, it might be let if a satisfactory tenant should turn up. There was no house in the county more luxuriously fitted up, or more comfortable; and many people invented friends who were in want of a house simply in order to have an excuse for going over it, and investigating all its details, unsubdued



by the presence of any of the owners. And Sara Brownlow had gone to Masterton!—she, the young princess, for whom nothing was too good—who had taken all the dignities of her position as mistress of her father's house so naturally—and who was as little like a Masterton girl, shut up in an old-fashioned town-house, as can be conceived. How was she to bear it? Why should Jack have a residence which was so manifestly beyond his means and beyond his wants? Why should Mr Brownlow deprive himself, at his age—a man still in the vigour and strength of life—of the handsome house and style of living he had been used to? It was a subject very mysterious to the neighbourhood. For a long time no little assemblage of people could get together anywhere near without a discussion of these circumstances; and yet there was no fuss made about the change, and none of the parties concerned had a word of complaint or lamentation to say.

But when the two, who thus exiled themselves out of their paradise, were in the carriage together driving away after all the excitements of the period—after having seen Jack and his bride go forth into the world from their doors only two days before—Mr Brownlow's heart suddenly misgave him. They were rolling out of the familiar gates at the

moment, leaving old Betty dropping her curtsy at the roadside. It was difficult to keep from an involuntary glance across the road to Mrs Swayne's cottage. Was it possible to believe that all this was over for ever, and a new world begun? He looked at Sara in all her spring bravery—as bright, as fearless, as full of sweet presumption and confidence as ever—nestled into the corner of the carriage, which seemed her natural position, and casting glances of involuntary supervision and patronage around her, as became the queen of the place. He looked at her, and thought of the house in the High Street, and his heart misgave him. How could she bear it? Had she not miscalculated her strength?

"Sara," he said, taking her hand in his, as he sat by her side, "this will be a hard trial for you—you don't know how hard it will be."

Sara looked round at him, having been busy with very different thoughts. "What will be a hard trial?" she said. "Leaving Brownlows? oh, yes! especially if it is let; but that can only be temporary, you know, papa. Jack and Pamela don't mean to stay away for ever."

"But your reign is over for ever, my poor child," said Mr Brownlow; and he clasped her hand between his, and patted and caressed it. "When

Pamela comes back it will be a very different matter. You are saying farewell, my darling, to all your past life."

When he said this, Sara stood up in the carriage suddenly, and looked back at Brownlows, and across the field to where the spire of Dewsbury church rose up among the scanty foliage of the trees. She waved her hand to them with a pretty gesture of leave-taking. "Then farewell to all my past life!" said Sara, gaily. She had a tear in her eye, but that she managed to hide. "I like the present best of all. Papa, you must be satisfied that I am most happy with you."

With him! was that indeed the explanation of all? Mr Brownlow looked at her anxiously, but he could not penetrate into the mysteries that lay under Sara's smile. If she thought of some one else besides her father, his thoughts too were travelling in the same direction.

Thus they took possession of the house in the High Street. Whether Sara suffered from the change nobody could tell. She was full of delight in the novelty and all the quaint half-remembered details of the old family house. She was never done making discoveries—old portraits, antique bits of furniture—things that had been considered old-fashioned lumber, but which, under her touch, became gracious heir-

looms and relics of the past. Old Lady Motherwell, having recovered her temper, took the lead in visiting the fallen princess. The old lady felt that a sign of her approval was due to the girl who had been so considerate and Christian-minded as to refuse Sir Charles when she lost her fortune. She went full of condolences, and found to her consternation nothing but gaiety. Sara was so full of the excellence and beauty of her new surroundings that she was incapable of any other thought. Even Lady Motherwell allowed that her satisfaction was either real or so very cleverly feigned as to be as good as real; and the county finally grew bewildered, and asked itself whether the removal was really a downfall at all, or simply a new caprice on the part of a capricious girl, whose indulgent father could never say her nay?

All the time Powys kept steadily at work. Six months had passed, and he had seen her only in the company of others. They had never met alone since that moment in the dining-room at Brownlows, when Sara's fortitude had given way, and he had comforted her. In the mean time his position too had changed. Old Lady Powys, who once had lived near Masterton, had put the whole matter into Mr Brownlow's hands. She had written volumes of letters to him, and required from him not only investigation into the cir-

cumstances, but full details, moral and physical, about her son's family—their looks, their manners, their character, everything about them. It is too late to introduce Lady Powys here; perhaps an occasion may arise for presenting her ladyship to the notice of persons interested in her grandson's fortunes. She was as much a miser as was consistent with the character and habits of a great lady; if, indeed, she was not, as she asserted herself to be, a poor woman. But anyhow she was prepared to do her duty to her grandchildren. She had little to leave them, she declared. All the family possessions were in the hands of Sir Alberic Powys, her other grandson, who was like his mother's family, and no favourite with the old lady; but her poor Charley's son should have something if she had any interest left; and as for the girls and their mother, she had a cottage vacant in her own immediate neighbourhood, where they could live and be educated. Mr Brownlow, for the moment, kept the greater part of this information to himself. He said nothing about it to his daughter. He did not even profess to notice the wistful looks which Sara, sometimes in spite of herself, cast at the office. He never invited Powys, though he was so near at hand; and the young man himself, still more tantalised and doubtful than Sara, did not yet venture to storm the castle in which his princess was confined.

She saw him from her window sometimes, and knew what the look meant which he directed wistfully to the house, scanning it all over, as if every red brick in its wall, and every shining twinkling pane, had become precious to him. Perhaps such a moment of suspense has a certain secret sweetness in it, if not to the man involved, at least to the woman, who is in no doubt about the devotion she inspires, and knows that she can reward it when she so pleases. Perhaps Sara had come to be tacitly aware that no opposition was to be expected from her father. Perhaps it was a sudden impulse of mingled compassion and impatience which moved her at last.

For there came a day on which the two met face to face, without the presence of witnesses. Sara was coming in from a walk. She was arrayed in bright muslin, clouds of white, with tinges of rosy colour, and the sunshine outside caught the ripple of gold in her hair under her hat, just as it had done the day Powys saw her first and followed her up the great staircase at Brownlows to see the Claude. She had time to see him approaching, and to make up her mind what she should do; and found an excuse for lingering ten minutes at least on the broad step at the front door, talking with some passer-by. And old Willis, who had more to do in the High Street than he had at Brown-

lows, had grown tired of waiting, and had left the door open behind her——

Sara was standing all alone on the threshold when Powys came up. His heart, too, was beating loud. The sun was in the west, and she was standing in the full blaze of the light, with one hand on the open door. Powys was too much excited to think of the fine images that might have been appropriate to the occasion. He stopped short when he came to the steps which alone parted her from him. He had his hat off, and his face was flushed and anxious. There was a moment's pause—a pause during which the world and their hearts stood still, and the very breath failed upon their lips. And even then she did nothing that she might not have done to a common acquaintance, as people say. She made a step back into the house, and then she held out her hand to him. "It is so long since I have seen you—come in!" said Sara. And Powys made but one stride, and was within beside her. He closed the door, thrusting it to with his disengaged arm; and I suppose it was time.

When Sara stood in the sunshine, blinded with the light, blushing like a rose, and said "Come in!" to her lover, she knew very well, of course, that she had decided her fate. The picture was so pretty

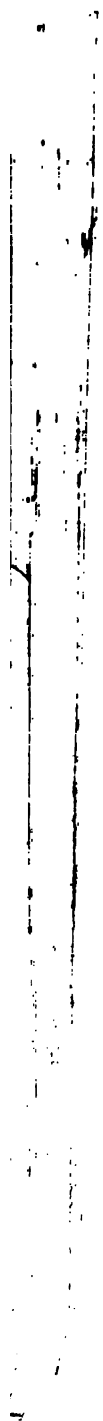
that it was disconcerting to have it shut out all at once by the impetuous young fellow who went in like a bomb, blazing and ardent, and thrust to the door upon that act of taking possession. The sunshine went in with them in a momentary flood. The clouds and the storms and the difficulties were over. I think that here the historian's office ends: and there is no more to say.

THE END.









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